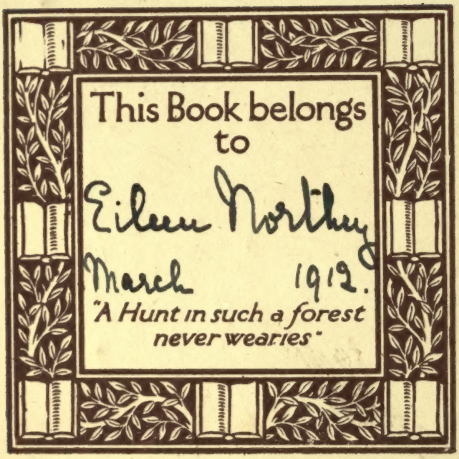
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THE KEY OF THE UNKNOWN

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE HILL,' ETC.

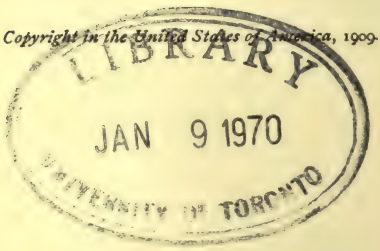
He holds the key of all unknown,
And I am glad;
If other hands should hold the key,
Or if He trusted it to me,
I might be sad.

MALTBIE D. BABCOCK.

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Portrait of the Author *Frontispiece*

CHAPTER I

JOAN REFUSES TO DEFEND HERSELF

Speak gently ! it is better far
To rule by love than fear.
Speak gently ! let no harsh word mar
The good we would do here.
G. W. LANGFORD.

Life is mostly froth and bubble ;
Two things stand like stone—
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in your own.
LINDSAY GORDON.

LADY MARY was silent.

Outside, the lawns and flower-borders lay in the spring sunshine ; the sweet confusion of tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, with a dark velvety background of wall-flowers, filled the air with fragrance and with a perfect riot of colour which defied rule and delighted the eyes.

The outlook from the pleasant sitting-room at Morningside was fair enough ; but within there was something disturbing in the atmosphere—a sense of tension, of opposing forces, of conflicting wills. Lady Mary was deeply hurt ; the lines of her fine aristocratic face had stiffened during the last few moments ; her full-toned voice, which had been as soft and sweet as a ringdove's in the Brantwood copse, had ceased its persuasive eloquence, and the sudden silence made

itself felt so oppressively that Cocker, the old brown and white spaniel, stirred uneasily on his luxurious mat and cast a sleepy glance in his mistress's direction.

Clearly something was wrong with his human friends; and an angry sob from Joan, which not all her efforts could repress, roused him in earnest, and the next moment he was in her lap trying to lick her face. But the girl pushed him away in her irritation.

'Be quiet, Cocker. No,' her voice softening as the old dog whined in sympathy, 'you cannot help me, you dear old fellow.'

'No one can help you, Joan, as long as you refuse to open your eyes and acknowledge the truth.' But Lady Mary's tone was somewhat chilling in its dignity; it was evident that her patience had been sorely tried.

She had been talking, arguing, persuading for nearly an hour, but Joan was impossible. She had refused almost passionately to regard herself as a culprit, or to own that she had done anything wrong. For the first time she turned on that dearly loved friend with reproach and anger.

'You are unjust to me, Lady Mary,' she repeated for the second time. 'Why should I submit tamely to such accusations when they are not true?'

'Joan, Joan, would you tell me to my face that I am a liar?' and a delicate flush rose to Lady Mary's face.

'You know such a thought never entered my head,' returned the girl indignantly; 'but all the same you are utterly mistaken.'

'Am I mistaken in thinking that Craig has been making love to you?' demanded Lady Mary with increasing sternness.

'No, for it is the truth, and God forbid that I should deny it! But am I to blame because I have found favour

in your nephew's eyes?' And there was a naughty sparkle of triumph in Joan's own eyes as she spoke which contradicted her assumed calmness. But the next moment it was repressed.

'There is no need to defend myself with words,' she continued, 'when my actions have sufficiently proved my innocence.'

'You mean that you have refused him?'

'Yes, I mean that, though I never told you so, and I think I deserve praise instead of blame from Craig's people. I wonder what other girl in my position'—here Joan's breast heaved stormily—'would have behaved half as well!'

A faint smile crossed Lady Mary's countenance: Joan was evidently well equipped for her defence.

'Yes, but, Joan, dear child, if you could only assure me, for my own and Lady Merriton's comfort, that you are in no danger of returning Craig's affection.' Then the young girl drew herself up with a haughty gesture.

'How dare you or any one ask me such a question! When I would not even answer Craig, do you think any other person would have a chance! Has a girl no right to be the keeper of her own heart and conscience, that you would seek to tear out her most sacred secrets! No, I will not answer you, Lady Mary; I refuse to be cross-examined and treated as a naughty child!' Then, as she saw the pained expression on her friend's face, Joan's proud stubbornness relaxed a little. 'I—I do not wish to grieve you—perhaps I had better go away. If I stayed longer I might say something which I should regret—you have been so hard on me, and I am not myself.' And the girl looked so pale and drooping that Lady Mary's kind heart was touched.

'I did not mean to be hard, Joan, but you have tried

me sorely. Yes, you shall go, and we will finish our talk another time. There is more that I have to say'—with a heavy sigh—'but we are not fit for it just now. You are young, my dear, and you are only thinking of yourself, but I am bound to consider my brother's interests.'

'If I am to be a trouble to you, you had better send me away.' Then Lady Mary winced slightly. How strange that Joan should say that! The arrow unawares finds its mark sometimes.

'We will finish our talk later,' she said gently. 'I think I shall send a note to Lady Merriton and tell her that I have a headache, and ask her to excuse us this evening.' She looked a little anxiously at Joan as she said this.

'Yes, I think that would be best. I had certainly no intention of accompanying you to the Abbey.' Joan's air was slightly defiant, but Lady Mary had no wish to renew the argument.

'I am glad we are in one mind on that point. Willis shall take the note when he goes out. Do not let me keep you, Joan, the air will do you good.' And, holding out her soft white hand, 'We will not part in anger, my dear.' But though the girl yielded to the kindly overture, the kiss of peace was given so reluctantly that Lady Mary could not fail to notice it.

Her eyes filled with tears as the door closed on Joan. She brushed them away with a hand that was not as firm as usual. She must write her note to her sister-in-law; it need only be brief, Hildegarde would understand that the headache was only an excuse, and she would keep Merriton from making fussing inquiries. It was no falsehood, for her head had been throbbing during the last ten minutes; she would be thankful for a little solitude to collect her thoughts.

The note written and dispatched, Lady Mary settled into her easy-chair and closed her eyes. A scene such as this had taxed her serenity rather heavily, there was a real ache at her heart. 'This sort of thing ages one,' she said to herself. But there were few signs of age about Lady Mary; she carried her fifty-five years very gallantly. She was a handsome, well-preserved woman, and her quiet, regular life had kept her young. People were often surprised to find that she was over fifty. But she was accustomed to speak quite frankly about her age. 'I am five years younger than Merriton,' she would say. 'Yes, we both wear well—we are neither of us afraid of air and exercise.' Nevertheless, as Lady Mary sat alone in the spring sunshine, she told herself that her interview with Joan had aged her.

Joan was very dear to her; she often spoke of her as her adopted daughter, and all these years she had treated her with the tenderness of a mother. Joan's father, the Rev. Herbert Leigh, had been a distant cousin of Lady Mary's husband; but Sir Martin Boyle had taken very little notice of the Leigh family until after his cousin's death. He came back from the funeral looking rather grave and impressed.

'I am afraid they will be left rather badly off,' he said to his wife, 'so it was a mercy all those children did not live. They have actually lost five—most of them boys—and there is only one grown-up son and a little girl, Joan, left. Poor Mrs. Leigh told me all about it; she said she and her husband had never got over their loss.'

'Five children, I should think not!' And Lady Mary, who was childless, thought sadly of the full nursery which death had emptied.

'Wait a moment,' continued Sir Martin, 'she said

something about a baby girl—that makes six.' Then, as he caught sight of Lady Mary's sad, wistful face, he hurried on. 'Of course it was very rough on the Leighs ; but still, with delicate health and that narrow income, how could he have clothed and fed and educated eight children ?'

'Of course I understand what you mean, Martin.'

'The boy Heath seems a very promising young fellow. He has won more than one scholarship and is doing splendidly at Oxford. His mother seems very proud of him. I was thinking, Mary, that one might hold out a helping hand to a manly young fellow like Heath Leigh who knows how to work. Vincent told me that he was a clever, pushing fellow, who would make his mark some day.'

'And the child Joan ?'

'Oh, she is a mere baby. A taking little creature enough, not pretty, but very winning in her ways,—regularly spoilt, I should say. Why, there's eighteen or nineteen years between her and Heath.'

Sir Martin kept his word and did a kinsman's part by the widow and her two children. More than once Mrs. Leigh and Joan stayed at Roskill Priory, Sir Martin Boyle's place. Heath Leigh came often. Both Lady Mary and her husband thought highly of him. His career at Oxford had been brilliant. He was ordained and had a fellowship, and his friends prophesied great things of him. In his heart Heath Leigh was inclined to agree with them ; he had plenty of assurance and self-confidence, which had helped him over many a difficult place, but it must be owned that he was careful to conceal this. He was quiet and a little reserved in manner, and he and Lady Mary became great friends. But her aristocratic soul was secretly

disappointed when the young fellow of Oriel threw up his fellowship to marry the only daughter of a wealthy haberdasher in Leeds, who brought her husband a rich dower.

Heath would tell his wife laughingly sometimes, that he was born under a lucky star, things went so well with him. He had honestly fallen in love with Silence Wootton, and had sacrificed his fellowship without much regret; but it was not long before a good living was offered to him. Kelmscott Rectory was only a few miles from Leeds, where Silence had lived all her life; and if this were privately a matter of regret to Heath, he was sufficiently infatuated with his young wife to be able to sympathise with her joy in being within reach of her parents, and he certainly behaved very well on the whole, though he and his father-in-law, a pompous, purse-proud man, had nothing in common. Mrs. Wootton was less antagonistic to his taste; she was a homely, gentle woman, rather quiet and reserved, like her daughter Silence.

Lady Mary's godson, Vere, was born at Kelmscott Rectory only a few weeks before Sir Martin Boyle died. His nephew Rodney Boyle, a barrister in good practice, inherited the title and Roskill Priory. Lady Mary wasted no time over her flitting. Her brother, who was devoted to her, had offered her a charming house which was almost at the gate of Brantwood Abbey.

'You will come back to us, Mary?' he said, looking at her with wistful affection; her widow's dress and sadness seemed to invest her with a strange new dignity. 'Hildegarde and I will watch over you, and Dorothy and the boys will cheer you up.'

'I know how good you and Hilda will be to me,'

returned the widow gently. 'Thank you, George, I have always liked Morningside, and if you have no other tenant, it will suit me perfectly, and I shall live and die among my own people'; and Lady Mary's voice was so full of pathos that the Earl walked suddenly to the window. He was a kind-hearted man, and hated to see people in trouble. It was such infernal luck, he muttered to himself, that poor Martin should be cut off in his prime—a strong man too!

Lady Mary mourned her husband long and sincerely, but she was by no means a broken-hearted widow. Her married life had been tranquil and even happy, far more so than she had dared to expect. Her husband had adored her, and she had given him plenty of wifely affection; but only her brother and Lady Merriton, and she herself, knew that he was not the man she ought to have married. But, except to her, this was ancient history and had long been forgotten. But Lady Mary, as she yielded to Sir Martin's tempestuous wooing, strove vainly to make him understand that the best part of her affection had been buried in Maurice Annersley's grave.

Many women have sad chapters in their young life—they have met, passed, and then lost their rightful mate—but not all women are so tenacious in their affections and memories as Lady Mary. She had never forgotten the lover of her youth—she never would forget—but the pride of caste, the Merriton sense of dignity, the habits of filial obedience had nerved her to sacrifice her own and Maurice's happiness.

'My parents and George will not hear of my marrying you,' she said to him. 'But I never, never can forget you, Maurice.' And he had bowed his head to her decision and left her.

The Merritons had their pride, but Maurice Annersley had his too; if Lady Mary was ashamed of his poverty and humble parentage, he was far too proud to plead with her. 'It was the desire of the moth for the star! What business had I, a poor curate,' he told himself bitterly, 'with no hope of preferment, to fall in love with an Earl's daughter! And yet —yet we loved each other, and by all human and divine laws she is mine.'

Maurice Annersley was a good man, but he bore his trouble badly; his unhappiness and restlessness made him reckless of consequences, he overworked, took cold—there was pulmonary disease in the Annersley family—and before two years had elapsed since Lady Mary had shut the gates of Brantwood Abbey behind him, Maurice lay in his grave. 'Where the weary are at rest' was the epitaph he himself chose to put over it. Lady Mary had been very loyal to her husband and had kept nothing from him; but with all his sympathy Sir Martin had been a little dense.

'Poor fellow—poor fellow!' he muttered. 'But never mind, my darling, it is better so; they would never have let you marry him.'

'No, I suppose not; George was very angry, I remember.' But Lady Mary had shivered as she said this; for she had her moments of remorse—in the quiet dawns when day was breaking, or when the breadths of evening sky were flooded with the dying sunsets.

What if she had been faithful to him and her love? They might have waited for each other for years. What did it matter if the bloom and glory of their youth had faded, if the end crowned all! The aftermath may not be as seductive and satisfying as the early

gleaning, but it may have a manna-like sweetness to a hungry heart. If she had only kept faith with Maurice—ah! there lay the sting and the doubt—perhaps then Merriton might have believed in their sincerity, and rewarded their long patience, and consented to use his interest on Maurice's behalf! A rich living might have been found for him. But at this point Lady Mary would cover her face with her hands. Where had her thoughts carried her? Shame on her! was not the dead beautiful face hidden for ever from her sight, and was she not Martin's wife!

But as she sat there in the lonely room, the old haunting memories came thick and fast. Then a sort of inspiration came to her. Her talk with Joan was not yet finished. She had that to say which would give them both pain. What if she were to soften Joan's indignation and excite her sympathy by telling her about Maurice? Joan cared for Craig—she was certain of that, in spite of the girl's angry silence—it would be well for her to know that another woman had loved and suffered and sacrificed herself to a sense of duty. 'Joan is perverse, and at times difficult, but she has a noble nature.' And when she had arrived at this conclusion Lady Mary stepped through the low window and sought to regain her calmness amongst her birds and flowers.

CHAPTER II

LADY MARY'S REQUEST

Wondrous is the strength of cheerfulness, altogether past calculation its powers of endurance. Efforts, to be permanently useful, must be uniformly joyous—a spirit of all sunshine, graceful from all gladness, beautiful because bright.—T. CARLYLE.

A cheerful friend is like a sunny day, which sheds its brightness on all around; and most of us can, if we choose, make of this world either a palace or a prison.—Sir J. LUBBOCK.

JOAN had now lived seven years beneath Lady Mary's roof. She was sixteen when her mother died, and she was three-and-twenty now. Not that Joan looked her age; she was one of those fortunate people whose youthful vivacity and superabundance of life make them appear younger than they really are. Lady Dorothy, who was two years her junior, looked mature beside her. 'No one would take you for more than eighteen, Joan,' Lady Mary would say sometimes, in a tone of fond rebuke, when the girl's high spirits and sense of humour had carried her too far; but in her heart she loved Joan's joyous temperament and *gaieté de cœur*.

Lady Mary was a widow then, and had not long settled into her new home; but, in spite of Dorothy and the boys, she had many lonely hours, when Cocker and her books were her only companions.

There was no question where Joan's future home would be. Kelmscott Rectory was large, and there was abundance of loaves and fishes, and Heath Leigh was more than willing to do his duty by his young sister.

'We had better do up the Porch Room for Joan,' he said to his wife the night after his mother's funeral. He had fully intended to bring Joan back with him; but Lady Mary, in the kindness of her heart, begged that the child might come to her for a little visit. 'A change will do her good,' she wrote; and Joan had eagerly begged her brother's permission to accept the invitation.

When Heath brought out the suggestion about the Porch Room, Silence laid down her work and regarded him with reproachful eyes.

'I always intended that room for Wanda, when she is old enough to sleep alone.' But the Rector, who was certainly master in his own house, pooh-poohed this.

'You are previous, love; Wanda is still in the nursery. Joan will probably occupy the room for years before our little girl will need it—who knows where we shall be by that time?' But, though Silence submitted as usual to her husband's will, he was not sure in his heart that Joan's arrival as an inmate of the Rectory was entirely welcome to her.

More than once he had had an uneasy conviction that she and Joan did not exactly hit it off.

Silence was a little tenacious in her attachment to her belongings. She had a large heart, and as a wife and mother she was simply perfect; but she narrowed her sympathies too much, and she was by no means devoid of jealousy.

Young as she was, Joan had already shown a disposition to monopolise her brother, and to make claims

on his time in rather an audacious manner. She was injudicious and tactless too in the nursery, and set her sister-in-law's wise rules at defiance; it was often necessary to read the riot act there. Silence would complain to her husband rather bitterly that the children were never so noisy and ill-behaved as when Joan was staying at the Rectory.

'Wanda actually put out her tongue at nurse,' she continued in a grieved tone; but the Rector only threw back his head and laughed.

'Wanda is only a baby,' he observed; for he was a most indulgent and loving father. Nevertheless, he wondered how it would be when Joan came to live with them. Silence was a dear woman, but she had her limitations, and Joan could be perverse and difficult —if they failed to understand each other, there would be ructions, and then his peace would be gone!

Happily for all their sakes, these fears were not to be realised. The Porch Room had been repapered, and Silence and nurse were busy sewing at the new cretonne curtains and bed furniture—in a few days all would be ready. And then came an urgent letter from Lady Mary, begging the Rector to come to her, as she had a very important proposition to lay before him. 'If you could spare me a few hours, I should be deeply grateful, and we could talk things over at our leisure,' she wrote. Then, as Heath read the letter, a glimmer of the truth crossed his mind—it was something connected with Joan—but he said nothing of this surmise to Silence.

So, when Lady Mary unfolded her scheme, he listened to her with grave attention.

Lady Mary was lonely. The boys would be leaving home soon, and Dorothy was occupied with her gover-

ness and masters. 'Besides, her mother has the first claim on her,' she finished with a sigh.

'Joan is very young, but from a child I have been fond of her,' she continued presently, 'and I think she is much attached to me.'

'I am quite sure of that, Lady Mary.'

'She misses her mother sadly, Heath, and I think it comforts her a little to be with me. I—I am very fond of young people, and I think I understand them. Joan has rather a complex nature; I am not sure—if you will pardon my frankness—that she and Mrs. Leigh get on well together.'

'I am afraid they don't quite hit it off,' returned the Rector ruefully.

'No! one can see that. Joan can be difficult at times, and I fear Mrs. Leigh might find her trying. The children are so young that Joan would have no companion. Now, may I tell you my plan?' And as Heath bowed his head, Lady Mary, with an eagerness she could not hide, made known her scheme. Might she keep Joan, not for a visit, but permanently? She should be her adopted child. She would do everything in her power to make her happy.

'Joan loves the country,' she went on; 'she will be as happy as a bird roaming about the Brantwood woods. It would really be an advantage to her, for she could share Dorothy's governess, and the masters who come to the Abbey could give her lessons. She and Dorothy would study and practise together, and, as Lady Merriton says, it will be a mutual benefit. I do not think Joan's life will be dull, and she shall spend her holidays with you if you wish.' Then, as Lady Mary looked wistfully at him, Heath was quite ready with his answer. It had not taken him long to

weigh the pros and cons of Lady Mary's plan. Only there was one question he must ask first.

'Do you think Joan is likely to agree to this, Lady Mary? Shall we have the child in and ask her?'

'Yes, by all means; but I think it would be better for you to speak to her alone.' And Lady Mary would have risen from her seat, but Heath prevented her.

'Then I will go to her; I know where to find her.' But Heath was back in a surprisingly short time. He looked relieved, and yet there was a deprecating, half-vexed expression on his face. He loved his young sister dearly, and it was only natural that he should feel secretly hurt that Joan should prefer to stay at Morningside.

'You are right, Lady Mary—Joan thinks she will be happier here than at Kelmscott. She has taken rather a dislike to the place, because she says it is ugly and smoky.' It was so like Joan to state her opinions and her likes and dislikes without considering other people's feelings. And Heath remembered that Silence had never found fault with her environment. 'She wants nothing but me and the children—bless her!' he said to himself.

'If Joan is willing,' he continued, 'I am quite ready to accept your generous offer, Lady Mary; but it must be on one condition, that you incur no expense on Joan's behalf. I am not speaking of her maintenance'—as Lady Mary flushed up at this—'but with regard to her education and clothes I must certainly insist on defraying all expenses. Joan shall have a proper allowance—I will ask you to advise me on that point.' Then, as Lady Mary looked still dubious, 'My dear lady, before long my wife and I will be rich people'; for Joshua Wootton's health was just then

causing his wife and daughter the deepest anxiety. 'Joan is my only sister; I look upon her as a sacred charge.' And then Lady Mary, in spite of her disappointment, did not venture to say more. She had gained her wish, and she was not to be deprived of her girlish companion, but she would have dearly loved to provide for all Joan's wants. 'She would have seemed more like my own child,' she said to herself.

Joan rejoiced openly when Heath told her that it should be as she and Lady Mary wished; nevertheless, her conscience felt an unaccustomed prick when she bade her brother good-bye the next day.

'You are not vexed with me, Heath?' she said, fingering his button-hole restlessly. 'Of course I like to be with you; but you and Silence have the children, and Lady Mary has no one. And then—then,' in rather a choked voice, 'I always feel that Silence does not want me.' And the obvious truth of this remark made Heath answer her rather sharply.

'You need not have said that, Joan; you are old enough now to cure yourself of your awkward habit of treading on people's corns. A little more consideration for people's feelings, my dear child!' Then, as Joan stared at him blankly, alarmed by this sternness, he kissed her with more than his usual affection. 'There, there, I am not really vexed, my girlie! But I should like to have you with me every Christmas.' And Joan, who was a little subdued by her brother's unusual tenderness, promised him again and again that nothing should prevent her from coming to the Rectory—unless she broke her leg or Lady Mary were ill.

Lady Mary's plan worked excellently, and all these years nothing had disturbed the harmony between Morningside and Brantwood Abbey.

Joan and Lady Dorothy were inseparable; they studied, practised, and sketched together under the eye of the excellent finishing governess, whom Lady Merriton considered a treasure. As soon as they were old enough to reap the benefit of the change, they went under Miss Cresswell's wing to Paris, and the following year to Dresden, when Lady Merriton decided to pass the winter at Rome and Florence. Lady Mary offered to accompany them; these long absences from Joan told her the girl had become indispensable to her happiness. Joan's fun and lively sense of humour, her snatches of song, her merry laugh, made the home of her widowhood brighter. 'I shall never be sufficiently grateful to you for letting me have the child,' she said one day to Heath with tears in her eyes; 'she is like a sunbeam in the house.' But though he heard this with much satisfaction, Heath could not help feeling that the gratitude was not all on Lady Mary's side. Joan's bi-annual visits to the Rectory, short as they were, proved to him that as an inmate she would be a disturbing element in his household.

'When two women want to monopolise a man, and are inclined to stand on their rights, the situation is likely to be strained,' he said to himself as he smoked his evening pipe in the solitude of his study. Silence did not love the odour of tobacco, and she rarely kept him company on these occasions. My Lady Nicotine was her most formidable rival. 'Joan is a dear child, but she is terribly tactless sometimes; there was decided friction between her and Silence last night—only I thought it better not to take any notice. I thought they parted rather coldly this morning.'

Meanwhile Joan, sitting on the rug at Lady Mary's

feet in her favourite attitude, was giving her own version of her visit.

'Oh yes, I have enjoyed it; but I am glad to be back at Morningside. I think Kelmscott gets uglier and smokier every year. And then Heath was so horribly busy, one never was able to get him comfortably for a moment, even if one bearded the lion in his den. Silence was always fussing round, warming his slippers and bringing him cups of hot soup and tea. She cossets him just as though he were an infirm old man, and Heath is really as strong as a horse. But she looked so offended when I told her so.'

'I hope you did not tell her that she was fussy?' observed Lady Mary. 'You are terribly outspoken, Joan.'

'I am afraid I did say something of the kind,' returned the girl truthfully, 'for she marched out of the study in such a stiff way, as though she had just swallowed a poker. Then Heath jumped up and went after her, but she would not come back. People always say that Silence is so sweet-tempered,' continued Joan, 'and that nothing really puts her out; but I don't think it was sweet-tempered to sulk and refuse to speak for the rest of the evening. Even Heath could not make her talk. She said her head ached and she must be quiet.'

Lady Mary sighed and shook her head. She knew exactly what had happened. Joan's lamentable want of tact, her girlish impertinence, and Silence's dignified resentment. Would any devoted wife like to be told that she was fussing round and coddling her husband, or to have it implied that her room was preferable to her company? Joan had forgotten her manners, that was evident, and Silence was right to show her dis-

approval. But Lady Mary had not the heart to scold her favourite on the first evening of her return.

Joan, who was complacently basking in the firelight, went on in her casual way. 'I wonder why Silence and I never can get on for long together. She is such a good woman, and is so choke-full of virtues, but somehow she always riles me and gets on my nerves. She is so extremely limited; she never seems to read and widen her mind. She will sit and sew contentedly for a whole evening and hardly open her lips. And there are so few things that really interest her—only Heath and the children and her Mothers' Bible Class. And yet Heath, who is so clever, never seems to find any fault with her.'

'Why should he, my dear? Silence is an excellent wife and mother; I do not know any woman who manages her household better.' But Joan tossed her head a little contemptuously.

'Oh, I am not denying that—did I not say just now that she was a good woman? But what passes my comprehension is this—how can Heath, who is really a very clever, intellectual man, find a woman like Silence congenial to him?' But, as an interruption that moment occurred, Joan's question remained unanswered.

So the years had passed, and until the last few weeks nothing more than a passing cloud had marred Lady Mary's serenity. To be sure, Joan was sometimes a little heedless. She had a quick temper, though she generally kept it under control. Now and then she did foolish things, but she was always very contrite afterwards. But surely, with all her cleverness, Lady Mary must have been short-sighted and dense, if the idea never crossed her mind that one of her nephews might possibly fall in love with Joan—that idleness and propinquity might work mischief. There were

four goodly sons at Brantwood when Joan first came to live at Morningside. To be sure, they were seldom at the Abbey. The eldest, Lord Josselyn, was with his regiment in Ireland, and was a gay young lieutenant of Hussars. Most of the Bastows had been either soldiers or sailors, and Lord Josselyn's younger brothers intended to follow his example. The second son, Clyde, wished for a commission in the Lancers. The youngest son, Craig, who was the cleverest and strongest of Lord Merriton's sons, later on begged that he might enter the Royal Engineers. Archibald had chosen the navy. But though the Earl loudly lamented that not one of his sons shared his tastes for a country gentleman's life, or had any desire to take part in the legislation of their country, he was easily overruled by his headstrong youngsters.

They had the fighting instinct of the Bastows, he knew that well, and but for his lame leg—the result of a boyish accident—which never troubled him now, thank goodness, unless he were over-fatigued, Lord Merriton might have had it himself. 'Well, well, I suppose the lads must have their way; they have only one life to live, and they may as well get some pleasure out of it. But I tell you what it is, Hildegarde'—and here the Earl's good-natured face wore a worried expression—'if Josselyn goes this pace, there will be—eh—what——?' as Lady Merriton drew herself up. But in consideration for her feelings he refrained from finishing his sentence.

CHAPTER III

IN THE ABBEY WOODS

Be honest with yourself, whatever the temptation ; say nothing to others that you do not think, and play no tricks with your own mind. Of all the evil spirits abroad at this hour, in this world, insincerity is the most dangerous.—J. A. FROUDE.

IT was not long after that winter spent in Rome and Florence that trouble came to Brantwood Abbey. The third son, Archibald, who was in the navy, met with a severe accident, and was lying in the hospital at Malta. The telegram which informed Lord Merriton of his son's mishap had been so cautiously worded that neither he nor his wife were prepared for the sad intelligence which reached them the next day, that Archibald had died without recovering consciousness. It was a great and unexpected blow to the parents, and Lady Merriton took it badly. She was a devoted mother, though rather too ambitious for her children's worldly advantage ; but Archie, with his handsome face and high spirits, was her special darling. Nevertheless, when two years later Clyde, the second son, succumbed to enteric at Johannesburg, she was equally broken-hearted and refused to be comforted.

'My trouble is greater than I can bear,' she said to her husband. But the Earl, who was looking worn and

aged, could find no word of consolation. Clyde, who had never given his parents any anxiety, was lying in his African grave; and Josselyn, his heir, cared for nothing but his own pleasure; and as he had developed a passion for racing, and from time to time stories of his dissipated habits and gambling debts reached his father's ears, there was some reason for the Earl's bitter complaint 'that that young fool of a Josselyn would ruin them all.'

'He has got into a bad set,' Lady Merriton would reply in a dejected voice; 'Arthur was such a dear good boy before he left home. If he would only marry and settle down. Lady Marjorie Colvin would be just the wife for him. She is good-looking and sensible, and has a tolerable fortune of her own.' But though Lord Merriton agreed with her, it was evident that he was not sanguine on the subject. Josselyn was not disposed for matrimony; he preferred his liberty. The girls he met in society were not to his taste. He would have nothing to say to Lady Marjorie, or even to her cousin Lady Cicely, who was still more eligible.

'You may trot them out as much as you like, my lady,' he said one day, 'but I give you my word that I am not going to make love to any of them. A young fellow likes to have his fling. In a few years' time I will think about it.'

By and by there were graver anxieties. Lord Josselyn's health was seriously impaired, and his own recklessness and imprudence were to blame for it. He would have to resign his commission, as he could no longer fulfil his duties.

It would be necessary for him to winter in Egypt. One specialist, who detected signs of lung trouble, strongly advocated the Black Forest and open-air

treatment; but Lord Josselyn lent a deaf ear to him.

He would winter at Cairo; some of his friends were going, and they would have a good time. But when Lady Merriton and her daughter offered to join him there, his response was so discouraging that they dared not press it.

'He does not want us, mother,' sighed Lady Dorothy. 'Arthur is so changed; he never seems to care for any one but himself now. And he looks so dreadfully ill, too, though he will not allow us to say so.' And then again the Countess had declared that no mother had ever been more troubled.

Lord Josselyn's health improved so much after his winter in Egypt that his doctors spoke more hopefully of their patient. If he would spend his winters in a warmer climate—Egypt, Algiers, or even the Riviera—and lead a quiet life, free from excitement, he might live for a good many years yet; the threatening symptoms might even disappear altogether. 'But'—here the physician looked at him almost sternly—'you must not play with your health, Lord Josselyn, and you must carry out my orders, or I will not answer for the consequences.' But the young man only shrugged his shoulders.

'What did Sir Joseph say to you, Josselyn?' asked Craig, who was waiting for his brother outside.

'Oh, he told me to buck up and that sort of thing. And he gave me no end of advice: no late hours or excitement, no crowded rooms, fresh air and plenty of exercise. And he talked a lot of rot—they all do, you know. But a short life and a merry one, that is my creed. What's the good of leading a humdrum existence like that? I would rather you wrapped me up in my

old stable jacket—you know what I mean, old fellow!' But Craig's reply to this was straight and uncompromising, and perhaps hardly befitting a younger brother.

'I know you have always played the giddy goat, Josselyn; but I strongly advise you, for your own sake, not to play the fool now. Sir Joseph is a clever man—he is tiptop of his profession. In your place I should follow his advice.' But Josselyn only turned on his heel with an impatient exclamation.

'I am going to my club to have luncheon. We shall probably play bridge afterwards, so I suppose you won't come,' with a half-concealed sneer which brought the blood to Craig's face. But he returned quietly that he already had an engagement. Never were there two brothers more dissimilar. Craig and Archibald had been chums, Clyde too had always been in touch with them, but Josselyn was not on their plane.

Craig had attained his wish and was now in the Royal Engineers. At the present moment he was stationed at Aldershot, but it was understood that his company was intended for India. This prospect was delightful to him, and there was only one drawback to his satisfaction, and that was that he would have to leave Joan. Joan, his old playfellow, who was the joy and torment of his life! Oh, short-sighted Lady Mary, what was the use of locking the stable door when the steed was stolen! When Craig Bastow set his heart on anything he was likely to persevere in his efforts until he attained it.

When Lady Mary in her kind way had advised Joan to try the restorative effect of the fresh morning air, the girl had listlessly picked up her garden-hat from the hall table, but she hesitated to whistle for her

usual walking companion. Rascal's feelings would be hurt, for he never allowed his mistress to stir without him; but his restlessness and exuberance of life would jar on her present mood. Rascal was young and undisciplined, and the Brantwood copses were his happy hunting-grounds. Here he could bark himself hoarse at rabbit-holes, down which some white little furry tail had just whisked, or utter his war-whoop of defiant joy at the sight of a hedgehog creeping out of a ditch.

Joan had laughed until the tears had run down her cheeks at the little animal's mystification when the moving object became a motionless prickly ball in the grass. It was so droll to see the small terrier balancing himself on three legs with one paw raised as though to investigate the perplexing thing, and yet not venturing to touch it. When his prolonged barks had no effect, Rascal had found it necessary to relieve his feelings by breathless rushes round the prickly object in ever-widening circles, until sheer fatigue obliged him to desist. Strange to say, whenever they encountered a hedgehog in their walks, Rascal always went through this pretty pantomime, much to his own and Joan's delight.

Rascal was a great pet with his mistress. He had been only a young puppy when Craig brought him to her.

'He is the finest of Di's litter,' he had said to her, 'so I begged him from father; and you shall have him as soon as he is properly trained.'

Rascal was a very small fox terrier; his parents, Joe and Diana, were pedigree dogs, and the Earl was very proud of them.

Rascal was certainly a handsome little animal. His

coat was like white satin, it was so smooth and glossy; and his nose was like polished ebony. He was as playful as a kitten; but he had plenty of pluck and cleverness, and it was Craig's favourite amusement to teach him new tricks.

If Joan thought she could circumvent Rascal, she had reckoned without her host; for before she had reached the garden gate Rascal was flying over the lawn, and the next moment was leaping up against her with short exultant barks.

'Oh no, I don't want you,' she observed in a worried tone. Then Rascal's tail drooped and his small white body quivered with disappointment. He looked so abject and pitiful that Joan relented. 'Well, you may come then,' she sighed. And then, as she opened the gate, he tore down the road like a mad thing.

Joan followed him slowly. She was sore and unhappy and utterly out of harmony with the loveliness of her environment and the spring morning. And yet few prospects were fairer than that which met Joan's eyes as she left the gate of Morningside. To the left was the entrance to Brantwood Abbey. Some level meadows led to the ruins of the old monastery; and near a wide piece of water, partially covered with water-lilies, was the Abbey itself. To the right was a picturesque cottage and the mill and a small bridge, beyond which lay the sunny water-meadow, where the Earl's beautiful Alderney cows were feeding, and in the distance a background of dark firs.

On any other occasion Joan would have taken her usual short cut to the Brantwood woods, but she had her own reasons for going farther afield. For once she would follow the windings of the shady road and enter the wood by a small gate almost hidden in the

hedge. Here the wood was thicker and the solitude less likely to be invaded; and there was a certain little sunny glade she had once discovered, where there was a fallen tree and a bed of forget-me-nots near it.

How Joan loved those woods! But she loved still more the blue-blackness of the fir woods that clothed Sudlow Hill. Here she would wander for hours, either alone or with a chosen companion.

Joan was not long in reaching her chosen retreat. The gate was a little difficult to unfasten, and the brambles caught her as she passed through—a jagged rent in her skirt was the result; but then trifles did not vex her, and she made her way through the dark narrow woodland paths until she found the opening. Yes, there it was in its sunny loveliness, the old moss-grown trunk and the forget-me-nots carpeting the ground beside it. Here Rascal would roll with the joy of a Sybarite, till his mistress called him to order rather sternly.

How warm and pleasant the sunshine was! Joan took off her shady hat that the sweet, balmy breeze might blow round her. Oh, why was the world so lovely and she, Joan, so utterly, intolerably miserable! What had she done that all this trouble should come to her! 'Am I to blame because I have found favour in your nephew's eyes?' she had said to Lady Mary in an injured tone.

Perhaps in her secret thoughts Lady Mary wondered a little at Craig's infatuation. Some little bird of the air had carried the first hint of suspicion to Lady Merriton's ear, and she had sent for her sister-in-law to come to her.

'Mary,' she had said in a tragical voice, 'I am so unhappy and worried. Mrs. Flavel has been talking

to me. She says every one is noticing that Craig and Joan are always together, that she is sure that it is not a mere flirtation and that he really admires her. And you and I know that such a thing is out of the question —especially now.' But though Lady Merriton shrank from putting her meaning more clearly into words, her hearer well understood that, owing to Jossleyn's increasing ill-health, Craig's position was likely to be changed, and that his marriage would be a matter of importance.

It was in this way the bomb was sprung upon Lady Mary. Nevertheless, as she walked slowly back from the Abbey, in sore perplexity of spirit, her first feeling was one of wonder.

Joan was not a pretty girl; indeed, if it had not been for her beautiful hair and her fine clear complexion, she might almost have been called plain. But her hair was glorious, though no one could exactly define its colour. It was certainly not golden, and it was too red to be auburn. It was probably a mingling of all three, only the red predominated; and it was very thick and long.

One evening Joan, who was in a frolicsome mood, had taken out her hairpins, and the great ruddy mass came tumbling over her white shoulders. 'I never saw such a sight,' Lady Mary had said afterwards to her sister-in-law. 'Really, the child looked quite beautiful for once in her life.' But the Countess had only smiled a little incredulously. She did not admire Joan's style, though she allowed that her figure was good and that she held herself well.

Joan's eyes were bright and expressive, though they were somewhat small. They were hazel, but in some lights they looked almost green. Archie, who loved to tease her, used to call her Becky Sharp.

'Becky had green eyes,' he would say. But Joan always treated these remarks with contemptuous silence. She was not vain, though now and then the wish crossed her that she could be as pretty as some of the girls who came to the Abbey. Like Lady Marjorie Colvin or Lady Cicely O'Brien, for example. Lady Cicely especially was the object of her admiration. She was dark-haired and grey-eyed, and Joan always maintained that she was far handsomer than her cousin.

As Joan recalled her conversation with Lady Mary that morning, an uneasy conviction began to assail her. Was she really so free from blame after all?

'I think few girls would have behaved so well under the circumstances,' she had said proudly, when Lady Mary's reproachful words had goaded her to defend herself; but would her conscience acquit her so entirely? She had chosen to ignore the truth, but had she really been blind to the change in Craig's manner?

She had always been on excellent terms with Clyde, Archibald, and Craig Bastow, but she had an instinctive dislike for Lord Josselyn's society. Not that he ever took much notice of Joan. She was just Aunt Mary's *protégée*, who did not interest him in the least. 'That red-headed girl,' he called her once, to Craig's profound disgust.

Craig had always been Joan's special chum, who fetched and carried for her and did all her girlish behests without grumbling. In his idle moments he would accompany her and Lady Dorothy on their sketching expeditions, and load himself with the necessary apparatus. He was always ready for tennis or croquet. They played croquet at Morningside, but the tennis courts were in the Abbey grounds.

And then suddenly Craig's manner changed. He

was still her good comrade and friend, but he treated her with greater deference. More than once, when they were alone together, a look or tone had made Joan vaguely uneasy. Why was he so much nicer than he used to be—so watchful and observant of her lightest word? But at this point of her retrospect and self-examination Joan was disturbed by Rascal's hysterical barking. A brown, wrinkled leg was visible under the mossy log, and Joan started from her seat as a large toad crawled out from his hiding-place.

CHAPTER IV

'HE MUST MARRY MONEY'

Unnoticed, saving each to each,
The look, the touch,
The voiceless language, silent speech
That mean so much.

E. H. KEEN.

Ah! sure within him and without,
Could his dark wisdom find it out,
There must be answer to his doubt.

TENNYSON.

JOAN had no special antipathy to toads as long as they remained at a respectful distance. She always declared their jewelled eyes went far to redeem their grotesque ugliness. But it was necessary to remove Rascal before he barked himself into a fit. So she wandered off into a still more secluded nook, where a smooth tree-trunk offered a seat. Then Rascal was chidden and made to lie down beside her, which he did most unwillingly. This little episode had broken the thread of her retrospect, but she took it up a little later.

It was easy for Craig to come over from Aldershot, and he spent most of his spare time at Brantwood. If Joan failed to turn up at the Abbey, he had always some excuse—a message from his mother or Dorothy—to take him to Morningside. Though Joan chose to

ignore the fact, her heart had begun to beat a little faster when she heard the garden gate swing quickly back on its hinges and the tall soldierly figure came striding over the lawn.

Craig Bastow was not so handsome as his brothers Clyde and Archibald, but he was a fine-looking fellow. His features were good, and he had a frank, pleasant expression. He had dark blue eyes, which, when he chose, could be sufficiently eloquent; and Joan always loved to hear him laugh, there was something so infectious and boyish in the sound. But during the the last few weeks he had been more grave.

And then—was it only ten days ago?—he had accompanied her to the woods to gather primroses. Dorothy had arranged to join them a little later, but something had detained her. More than once Joan had suggested that he should go back to the house to fetch her, but he had refused this. Primroses were plentiful and the baskets would soon be full; he knew a place a little higher up where they grew in profusion. And Craig was right. Joan's eyes fairly ached as she knelt on the ground and gathered her golden harvest.

Her basket was overflowing now, and she rose to her feet a little weary and giddy from her pleasant work. For some minutes her inner consciousness had told her that Craig's labours had ceased also. Why was he so quiet? She did not dare to turn her head to look at him, but as she rose he was close beside her. He took the basket from her hand and set it down in rather a peremptory fashion.

'There is no need to make yourself hot and tired, Joan; Dorothy will not need any more. Why not rest on the stile a moment?' But Joan objected to this. Dorothy must surely be on her way now; they must

go and meet her. But a light firm touch on her arm detained her.

'Why are you in such a hurry, Joan—I hardly ever get you alone for a moment? I want to speak to you. I must and will speak to you. You are always putting me off with some excuse.' Then, as she heard Craig's masterful tone, Joan's nerve failed her.

'Don't, Craig,' she said imploringly, but looking away from him as she spoke. 'We are so late. Oh, if Dorothy would but come! We must have taken a wrong turning and missed her.'

'What does it matter about Dorothy? Are you afraid to be alone with me?' and Craig's voice was reproachful. 'Joan, you surely do not need words to tell you how dearly I have grown to love you. I have always been fond of you, dear, but my affection has grown into something stronger and different. If I am ever to marry, you must be my wife.' But the girl snatched away her hand, and her face was white with a great fear.

'Oh, for pity's sake do not spoil everything!' she said in a distressed voice. 'We have been such dear friends, you and I. Oh, Craig'—as he looked at her in grave perplexity—'don't you understand you must never, never say such a thing to me again! What is the use of letting yourself care for me like that, when you know it is impossible!'

'I know nothing of the kind,' he returned almost angrily; 'every man has a right to ask the girl he loves to be his wife. Should you be afraid of waiting for me if I have to leave you and go to India?' But again she stopped him.

'Hush, you must not talk to me like this; it is wrong and I will not listen! Take back your words,

Craig, and I will try to forget them, and we will go back to our old ways. I can never be your wife, and I will not let you think so for a moment!'

'But why not, Joan?' and his eyes were full of blue fire. 'Do you mean to tell me that you do not care for me sufficiently? Except from your own lips, I will never believe such a thing.'

'I do care for you as a dear friend,' she returned unsteadily; 'you have always been so good and kind to me. But I do not wish you to say again what you did just now. I really mean it, Craig'—for Joan was growing desperate in her desire to escape.

Craig's face wore an expression of bewildered pain. He could hardly believe his ears. Joan, his sweetheart Joan, did not wish him to speak of his love—she repudiated his whole-hearted attachment—she only cared for him as an old friend. Good heavens, was he mad or dreaming!

'I really mean it, Craig.' This time Joan's tone was so hard and steady that Craig caught up the basket of primroses.

'We may as well meet Dorothy,' he said hoarsely, and Joan followed him meekly without a word. How could he guess in his anger that she was trembling from head to foot—that she could scarcely keep her tears back? She was wilfully allowing him to misunderstand her, but she dare not set him right. Not love him! when she would have willingly thrown herself into his arms and told him that she would wait for him all her life. She had hurt him cruelly, she knew that. They had only met once since that morning, and his manner had been so grave and stiff that Dorothy had asked her if they had quarrelled.

'Do I ever quarrel with any of you?' poor Joan

had answered. 'But I think Craig is a little put out with me because I told him the truth. People will disagree in their opinions, Dorcas dear.' Dorcas was her pet name for Lady Dorothy.

'But Craig is so sweet-tempered and never takes offence. You must have treated him badly in some way, Joan.' For Dorothy was very loyal to her brothers. But Joan only shrugged her shoulders; she must brave it out as long as possible.

'I did not say a word to him that was not true,' she said to herself dejectedly as she recalled that scene. 'How could I wish him to go on caring for me when it would only make him unhappy! His people would never allow him to marry me. Even Lady Mary told me the other day that they all want him to fall in love with Lady Cicely. "His parents have set their hearts on it," those were her very words. And even Dorothy owns she would like her for a sister. "She is as nice as she is pretty—you have often said so yourself, Joan."' And she had assented to this with a heavy heart. 'I like her much better than her cousin Marjorie,' she had added; 'there is more go in her. Lady Marjorie is nice too, though she is a little heavy in hand.' But though sheer honesty had obliged her to say this, the thought of Lady Cicely was a sore pain to her.

She had not lied to Craig in words—Joan had never told a falsehood in her life, with all her faults she was perfectly truthful—but all the same he had gone away believing what was utterly false. 'How could I have had the heart to remain silent?' she asked herself in remorseful anguish. 'And yet if I had set him right he would have found things out for himself—Craig is so quick. But he was angry and puzzled, and I played my part well. Oh, Craig, and you never guessed how hard it

was!' And here poor Joan broke down utterly and sobbed for a little while in a heart-broken way.

Her trouble was very great. She had grown to love Craig so dearly, and under other circumstances the avowal of his love would have been sweet to her ears. Oh, if she could only have put her hand in his and told him frankly that his affection was returned! But trouble would only have come of it. They would all have treated her as though she were a culprit and had committed some unpardonable offence. Even Dorothy, with all her sweetness, had the pride of her race. They would urge Lady Mary to send her away, and the gates of her paradise would be closed upon her. Joan had been guarding her secret very carefully the last ten days; it had therefore been a shock to her that morning when Lady Mary had questioned her so closely about Craig. 'People notice that you two are always together, and my sister-in-law seems uneasy about it; she is afraid of some silly flirtation. Young men are not always prudent. You will tell me the truth, I know, Joan.' It was in this way Lady Mary had exploded her little mine. But in her indignation Joan's temper had given way and she had refused all explanations. Never before had she so hurt and grieved her kind friend, and the thought of this added bitterness to her trouble.

Joan was beginning to repent her girlish stubbornness and pride. It was no fault of Lady Mary's that fate was so cruel to her and Craig—there was no need that she should be unhappy too. 'I will try to be more patient when she talks to me this evening,' she thought, as she slowly retraced her steps. 'I tried and worried her this morning. But then she took me by surprise. How could I guess people were spying on us and

carrying tales to Lady Merriton? I suppose some one overheard us in the copse—Craig spoke so loudly once or twice'; and here a hot flush came to Joan's face.

Meanwhile Lady Mary had had a visitor. She had just returned to the house when the Earl was announced. He had been riding to a distant farm, and had sent his horse on.

'I thought I would look in for a moment, Mary,' he said, throwing himself into an easy-chair as though he were fatigued. 'I know you are coming up to dinner this evening, but all the same I wanted a word with you.' Then a faint blush came into Lady Mary's face; in spite of her age, her colour still varied like a girl's when she was agitated or embarrassed.

'I have just sent Hildegarde a note to excuse our coming this evening. All this worry has given me a headache, George.' In this way Lady Mary boldly took the bull by the horns.

Lord Merriton laid aside his riding gauntlets. 'I am sorry to hear that,' he said slowly; for he was punctilious by nature, and rather inclined to live in a groove. Lady Mary had always dined at the Abbey on Thursdays, and he saw no reason why such an excellent rule should be broken.

'Of course you know best, my dear,' he said a little stiffly. 'Perhaps by the evening your headache will have left you.' But Lady Mary hastily interposed. Her headache had nearly gone now, but she did not wish him to know this.

'I have sent the note now, so Hildegarde will not expect us. I think I would rather come some other evening.' And then the Earl said no more on that subject.

Lord Merriton was a placid, well-preserved man, a

little heavy in build, but in his younger days he had been exceedingly handsome. He had the Saxon fairness which his three elder sons had inherited. Craig was darker in colouring, but he had his father's blue eyes.

In his earlier life he had taken some interest in politics, but he had never been a speaker, and during the last few years he had settled down to a country life, occupying himself with his farms and famous breed of shorthorns, and filling up his spare time with sport and golf. The slight lameness which at one time had hampered him had been considerably relieved by skilful treatment, and he was now able to take a tolerable amount of walking exercise, though he still preferred to be on horseback. He had no special intellectual tastes, and read little besides his paper and a few leading novels and books of travel. If the truth must be told, he was a little limited in his capabilities; but for all that he was an honest, true-hearted man, and Lady Mary dearly loved and honoured him.

'I am sorry about this worry, George,' she continued. Lady Mary invariably called her brother by his Christian name, whereas his wife always addressed him as Merriton. Lady Mary was perfectly aware that he had come to Morningside to talk things over with her, but that he would find it difficult to begin the subject—he would be afraid of giving her pain.

'Hildegarde seems a good deal put out,' he returned; 'but I tell her that she is making too much of it. I expect it is just a passing fancy on the boy's part. Young men, even the best of them, will have their little flirtations. Why, I had been half-a-dozen times in love before I was Craig's age. I was only telling my lady so just now. "You should only believe half you hear"

—those were my very words—" women are far too ready to talk and make mischief."'

'But, George, Mrs. Flavel is a sensible woman and never gossips or tells tales. She only said that she thought it right for us to know that at Herondale there was far too much talk about the young people. Somebody saw them in the wood together and declared that Craig was making love to Joan, and that frightened Hildegarde.'

Lord Merriton shifted uneasily in his seat. He had buoyed himself up with the hope that Lady Mary would take a different view of the matter, but her manner was hardly reassuring.

'Why don't you question the girl?' he said irritably; 'Joan will tell you the truth.' Then Lady Mary sadly assured him that she had done her best to win the girl's confidence, but that Joan had mounted the high horse and had been extremely uncommunicative and unreasonable.

'She certainly admits that lately there has been some attempt at love-making on Craig's part, and that she has done her best to put a stop to it. Indeed, I believe that Craig has gone so far as to make her an offer. I certainly understood that she had refused him.' Then a frown came to the Earl's brow: this was worse than he had expected.

'I must talk to Craig,' he said severely, and the sternness of his aspect filled Lady Mary with dismay. 'I must put a stop to this. In poor Josselyn's condition we can never expect him to marry and settle down, and it would be sheer madness for Craig to entangle himself with an attachment to a penniless girl who has very little to boast of in the way of family. You must forgive me, Mary, my dear, but though Joan is your

adopted child, she is not the wife for my son to choose.'

Lady Mary laid her hand on her brother's arm; it was a beautiful hand, though a little thinner than it used to be.

'George,' she said gently, 'do you think I do not know that—that I am not aware of your difficulties, and how poor Josselyn's debts are impoverishing the estate. You have had so much trouble, my dear, and if Craig were to fail you——' Then Lord Merriton rose to his feet in sudden impatience.

'But he must not fail us, Mary. I will talk to him. Craig is a good lad and has a sensible head on his shoulders; he is not a selfish fool like Josselyn. He has to think of others. He must marry money. If anything happens to Josselyn, Craig must leave the army—his mother and I will want him.' Here Lord Merriton's face worked with emotion. Then again the soft hand pressed his coat-sleeve.

'George, you know me by this time. You and Hildegarde can rely on me. Speak to Craig if you will, but my mind is made up—until the boy goes to India I shall have to send Joan away.' But though Lady Mary's face was sad, her voice was firm and determined. Where her brother's interests were at stake no sacrifice was too great to be made for his sake.

CHAPTER V

'I AM PROUD OF YOU, JOAN'

So many gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
While just the art of being kind
Is all the sad world needs.

E. W. WILCOX.

In the relations of the old with the young, the tenderness and sympathy may well be on the elder side, for age has known youth, but youth has not known age.—F. A. KEMBLE.

THE drawing-room at Morningside was the most comfortable room in the house. It was not large, but it was so well-proportioned, and the two deep bay windows with their cushioned seats, half concealed by tall palms and flower-baskets, made such charming nooks and recesses for *tête-à-têtes*. Lady Marjorie and her cousin Lady Cicely always looked a little conscious when Lady Mary would call them smilingly 'the flirtation corners,' but it may be doubted whether they were ever occupied for this purpose. Joan and Dorothy would sit there with their work or books, but during Craig's visits Joan had invariably turned a deaf ear to his hints. 'Lady Mary cannot either see or hear us there,' she would say in her decided way, as she seated herself in the low chair which she generally used.

In the spring evenings, or even in summer when it was damp and cheerless, there was always a bright fire, to the infinite content of Cocker, who loved to stretch himself on the white rug. 'I think I must be growing old like Cocker,' Lady Mary would say sometimes when she came down from her dressing-room and saw the cheerful blaze; but Joan would petition for a little fresh air.

Lady Mary had laid aside her widow's weeds—she knew Sir Martin would have wished her to do so—but she always wore black. She knew exactly what suited her, and loved rich heavy materials like velvet and satin, and she had a weakness for old lace; and as she had an excellent maid who took a great deal of pride in her mistress's appearance, Lady Merriton was not far wrong when she said once that her sister-in-law was one of the best dressed and most distinguished-looking women she knew. And yet Lady Merriton was rather *exigeante* on this subject, and was always lecturing her daughter for not taking more pains with her appearance.

Lady Dorothy was the greatest comfort to her parents, and she was a most affectionate sister, but she was not a social success. Though by no means a beauty, she was rather a sweet-looking girl; but she was reserved and had no belief in her own attractions, and her want of confidence made her at times shy and abrupt.

'I never can say nice things when I want to do so,' she would complain to her usual confidante, Joan. 'People think I am stupid or dense, because I do not laugh and say smart things as other girls do.' And it must be owned that Lady Dorothy's partners found her a little stiff and serious, though she danced well and made no demands on their good-nature.

Joan was always very nice and sympathetic on these occasions, for the two girls understood each other thoroughly.

'You do not make enough of yourself, Dorcas dear,' she said once. 'You don't set out your best wares where any passer-by can see them. Isn't there a saying that a woman is only as old as she looks? Well, I mean to coin a fresh proverb for your benefit—"A girl is only as pretty as she looks." No, I have not got that right. I mean, a girl can make herself pretty, if she only goes the right way about it.'

'Oh, Joan, how can you talk such nonsense!'

'It is not nonsense really, only I can't quite express my meaning. Now, if I had been in your place last night at that delightful ball, I would not have bothered my head about my want of beauty. I would have thought of my lovely new dress—it really was a dream, Dorcas—and how well I danced, and what a blessing it was that my skin was so white that I could wear turquoises. But no, I daresay not one of these comforting thoughts occurred to you.'

Dorothy smiled a little ruefully. 'I am afraid not, Joan. I never could take much comfort in clothes. I was only thinking how pretty Cicely looked, and how people seemed to like her. Why, her card was nearly full before she had been ten minutes in the room, and I had only three names down on mine.'

Joan looked at her affectionately; she was very fond of Lady Dorothy, and hated to see her depressed. 'You must not be so shy and serious with your partners, dear. Young men expect to be amused. You ought to have talked to Mr. Cathcart about his new motor; Craig says that he thinks of nothing else. And Captain Mountjoy is such a splendid cricketer;

he had quite an ovation at Lord's. I hope you congratulated him?' But Dorothy shook her head.

'I forgot all about it,' she said simply.

Lady Merriton would sometimes grumble to her sister-in-law over Dorothy's social failures.

'It is rather hard when one's only daughter is so disappointing,' she said one day. 'She is a dear good girl, and I really do not know what we should do without her at home, but when I take her out to any social function it quite depresses me to watch her. She looks about as lively as though she were going to a funeral or into a den of lions.'

Lady Mary laughed, but she felt called upon to defend her niece. 'It is only her shyness, Hildegarde. People think her reserved and unapproachable, but she only wants drawing out. She can be as merry as possible when she is at her ease. Why, I've seen her look quite pretty and animated when the right sort of person is talking to her.' But Lady Merriton only sighed.

'I sometimes think she will never settle. Why, at her age I was a mother. Don't you recollect how proud I was of my first baby, Mary? Josselyn was such a dear, with his soft fluffy curls. I don't think any of the others were so pretty. And yet look how he has turned out. Merriton was only saying last night that he perfectly dreaded opening a letter from him—that he was bringing us all to ruin.'

'Oh no, my dear,' interposed Lady Mary; 'I think George takes far too gloomy a view of the subject. Josselyn has promised to turn over a new leaf.'

'Still, things are bad enough,' replied Lady Merriton. 'And that is why her father and I are so anxious for Dorothy to marry well. But after that affair last

season——' and here she looked meaningly at her sister-in-law.

Lady Mary was silent. Dorothy had certainly missed her chance then. Lord Angus Rother, a young widower, had been attracted by the girl's sweetness and gentleness; and as he had a good fortune of his own, and was the younger brother of a duke, he was one of the best *partis* of the season. Lady Merriton's bosom had swelled with gratified pride and exultation. But she had reckoned without her host. On the very eve of her hoped-for engagement, when Lord Angus came for his final answer, Dorothy's heart had failed her.

'I like you so much,' she said to him piteously, 'but I do not care for you sufficiently to marry you. It is better to tell you this now, than for us both to be unhappy.' And though he argued the matter with her in a very loverlike fashion, Dorothy adhered to her resolution.

'I found out in time that I did not love him,' she said firmly. 'Why are you so angry with me, mother? If I married Lord Angus I should only be miserable. We have nothing really in common, and he would never have cared for me as he did for Lady Constance.'

But Lady Merriton had heard her with ill-concealed impatience, and it had been a sore subject ever since. Even Lady Mary, with all her desire to pour oil on the troubled waters, thought that Dorothy had been too hasty in her decision.

'I expect she cared for Lord Angus quite as much as I did for Martin,' she said to herself; 'and yet we were happy enough together during our married life.' And though she was very fond of Dorothy, she owned that she could not quite understand her.

'It is a pity Dorothy is not a little more adaptable,' she would say to her brother. 'In my day girls were not so full of fads, and they still had a touching faith in the opinion of their elders.' But Lord Merriton only shrugged his broad shoulders.

When Lady Mary and her young companion entered the drawing-room after dinner that evening they settled themselves as usual in their favourite seats. A low table with a reading-lamp was between them, but neither of them took up their work or books. Lady Mary leant back against her cushions and looked thoughtfully at the fire. She was wondering whether she should tell her story first before they reopened the vexed question; but Joan was too quick for her.

'Dunlop told me just now that Lord Merriton had been here this morning.' Dunlop was Lady Mary's maid.

'Yes,' returned Lady Mary, hesitating a little at this unexpected observation, 'but he did not stay long. He had been riding over to the Red Farm and was passing the gate. He seemed disappointed about our not dining there this evening.' But Joan brushed this aside. She liked to take her fences boldly, and not go round in search of gates.

'I suppose he came to talk to you about Craig?' she asked bluntly. 'Mrs. Flavel's interference and tale-telling has raised up a perfect hornet's nest about our ears. That is the worst of living in a village—people have so much leisure to discuss their neighbours' affairs.' There was a flavour of bitterness in Joan's words. She had always respected and liked Mrs. Flavel, but now she felt it would be hard work to forgive her.

'My brother was, of course, rather upset about all this worry. We cannot wonder at that, Joan. He

says he will talk to Craig—that under the present circumstances, and in Jossleyn's condition, Craig's sense of duty ought to have prevented him from acting in this irresponsible manner.' Joan rested her chin on her clasped hands and looked fixedly at the speaker. Lady Mary's manner was dignified, but she was certainly agitated and a little nervous.

'Of course you told Lord Merriton that Craig had proposed to me and that I had refused him?'

'I told him the truth, Joan; I thought he had a right to know, and I wished him to think as well of you as possible. He certainly seemed inclined to lay the entire blame on Craig.' Then an accusing flush came to the girl's face.

'I don't think that was quite fair to Craig. I ought to have understood and seen sooner. I—I—don't want Lord Merriton to be hard on him.' There was such remorseful pain in Joan's voice that Lady Mary's soft heart yearned to comfort her.

'Let us put it all aside for the present, dearest; I want to tell you about an old love story of my own. You thought me a little hard and unsympathetic this morning—perhaps that was why you refused to open your heart to me. But, my dear, you need not have misjudged me. When I was young I had my own trouble. I was not in love with my husband when I married him. There was only one man I wished to marry, and he was dead. But my dear Sir Martin was so good to me, and thank God I can say truly that our life together was peaceful and happy.' Then Lady Mary felt a warm girlish hand steal into hers.

'Please tell me more—I should love to hear it.' And then very simply and quietly Lady Mary turned to that page in her life's history which had been so marred

and tear-stained, and told her story. But before she had finished Joan was on the stool at her feet and her face was hidden on Lady Mary's lap.

'Oh, how could you—how could you give him up! In your place I would have waited any number of years. He was so good and he loved you so!'

'I thought it was my duty to give him up,' returned Lady Mary sadly; 'they all said so. But if you knew how I suffered! When they told me he was dying I thought I should have gone out of my mind.'

'But you went to him—surely you went to him, Lady Mary?'

'I would have gone if it had been possible; but we were abroad, and I should have arrived too late. He sent me his love and blessing, and begged me to believe that all was for the best. But somehow life never seemed quite the same after Maurice's death.'

'No, you are right there,' whispered Joan; and then she looked up into her friend's face. 'Dear Lady Mary, I know why you have given yourself the pain of telling me this story—you want me to follow your example and give Craig up. In your case I think the sacrifice was unnecessary—please you must let me say that—but it will be perfectly right for me. Do you think that I do not know that all Craig's people intend him to marry Lady Cicely? If I had not been in the way he would have proposed to her long ago, for I know he likes her; and she is so nice, and yet she is not a bit spoilt—she is one of the nicest girls I know.' Then, as Joan ended a little breathlessly, Lady Mary took the girl's flushed face between her hands.

'Joan, tell me the truth—whisper it in my ear if you will—did you refuse Craig because you do not love him?'

'No, Lady Mary,' and Joan's voice was firm and clear; 'I love Craig with my whole heart; I would be his wife joyfully and willingly to-morrow. But I never mean him to know this. I refused him because I love him far too well to spoil his life and bring trouble and disappointment to his people. There, I have told you my secret, because you have been so dear and good to me; and I know it will be safe with you.' Then Lady Mary smiled, but her eyes were full of tears.

'I am proud of you, Joan; you have been a brave girl.'

'Have I? I thought I played my part pretty badly; but it was only a first rehearsal, you know'; and there was a quiver of the girl's lips as she spoke.

'Yes; but the question is, how are we to act for the future?' and here Lady Mary's voice was solemn and pregnant with meaning.

'Joan, you have behaved as well as possible, and I love you all the more for your noble conduct. I trust you perfectly, but the situation is impossible; for Craig's sake—for all our sakes—I must send you away.' But though Joan's head drooped for a moment there was no reply.

'We must part, my child,' continued Lady Mary sorrowfully; 'at least for a few months, until Craig is safe in India. As long as he is at Aldershot, riding or motoring over here nearly every day, Morningside cannot be your home. You see that for yourself, do you not?' with an anxious glance at the downcast face. Then Joan nodded; she could not bring herself to speak yet. In her secret thoughts she had dreaded this. Of course Lady Mary was right, the situation was impossible. How was she to live there and see him woo Lady Cicely, and play her part

so perfectly that Craig should never have a suspicion of the truth? 'I am not strong enough to do it,' she said to herself; 'I should break down and disgrace myself; the prolonged effort would wear me out.'

'Yes, you are quite right,' she returned in a stifled voice, 'it would be far better for every one that I should go away.'

'It would not be for long, dear—only five or six months—and then our old life will begin again. Shall we make the best of it, Joan? There will be no difficulty about arranging matters. I will write to Heath and suggest that you shall pay him a long visit. Perhaps I may have to give him a hint, but I will be very careful. There is one comfort, you will not have to go to Kelmscott Rectory.' For a few months previously Heath Leigh had climbed another rung of the social ladder, and he was now a canon of St. Breda's. Joan, who had paid her brother a fleeting visit at Christmas, had been very enthusiastic in her description of the beautiful old house in the Precincts, and of the glorious cathedral; but on the present occasion there was no lightening of her gravity.

'Of course I am thankful that they have left Kelmscott,' she returned in rather a dreary voice. 'But five or six months with Silence—— No, there is no use talking about it; when a thing has to be done, it is better for one just to go and do it. You shall write to Heath, and I will set about packing as soon as you like.'

'As I like! Oh, Joan, are you so full of your own trouble that you have no time to be sorry for me? Do you know how I shall miss your dear bright face in the mornings and evenings?' Then Joan,

melted by that fond tone, threw her arms round Lady Mary's neck.

'Oh, I will try to be good and brave,' she sobbed, 'but it is so hard for both of us!' And after this they discussed things more calmly.

CHAPTER VI

'IF ANYTHING SHOULD HAPPEN!'

Never give way to melancholy. Nothing encroaches more. I fight against it vigorously. One great remedy is to take short views of life. . . . Then why destroy a present happiness by a distant misery which may never come at all, or you may never live to see? For every substantial grief has twenty shadows, most of them your own making.—SYDNEY SMITH.

IT was much later than usual when Joan bade Lady Mary good-night and went up to her room; but, tired as she was, she felt disinclined to seek her pillow. She took off her pretty evening dress and put on her dressing-gown, and, as her head felt hot and heavy, she let down her hair; then she turned down the light and sat by the open window to enjoy the refreshment of the cool night air. The moon had just emerged from the clouds, and there was a shining silvery path across the dark lawn, and only the weird sound of an owl hooting in the distance broke the deep stillness. But as Joan folded her hands behind her head—a favourite attitude with her when she felt disposed for meditation—the quiet and peace of the nocturnal hour failed to soothe her.

For deep down in her heart there was an unsolved problem and a great fear, to which she dare not give utterance. More than once that evening a question

had risen to her lips, but as she had looked at Lady Mary's tired face she had not the courage to ask it; but now in her solitude it pressed upon her with renewed persistence.

Lady Mary had talked with forced cheerfulness of the five or six months of absence. 'It is almost certain that Craig's company will be ordered to India in November,' she had said, 'and you shall come back to me the first possible day.' But though Joan had smiled and assented to this, the ominous question still made itself heard—'What if anything should happen during those months?' The last accounts of Lord Josselyn had not been good, and Dorothy had told her only the previous day that her father and mother were very anxious. 'If Arthur gets worse, they mean to go out to him,' she continued. 'Mother has made father promise to take her; they cannot bear the idea of his being alone at an hotel, and just now Craig cannot get leave of absence, he has to train his men for the summer manœuvres, and expects to be much engaged the next two or three months.' But Joan had been fully aware of these facts.

But if Josselyn were to die, how was Craig to go to India? The Earl would give him no peace—he would be obliged to retire and leave his beloved company. How could his parents be deprived of all their sons? Alas, alas, under those circumstances Craig's duty would be as clear as the daylight. Road-making on the frontier was at times a risky business; one or two of the mountain tribes threatened trouble—if Craig were the only surviving son and heir, his life would be too valuable to be sacrificed in one of those costly little frontier wars. Craig would have to crush down his ambition and longings for a soldier's life. What was

the Bastow motto? 'Faithful and enduring.' Would Craig be likely to shun his duty? The blood seemed to be suddenly chilled in Joan's veins as she followed out this thought; for if Craig did not go to India, Morningside could no longer be her home. The parting between her and Lady Mary might be for years, not months, unless—unless—and here Joan shivered afresh —Craig renounced his old sweetheart and married Lady Cicely.

Poor Joan, she could see no way out of the perplexity and darkness; in her heart-sick depression and trouble it seemed to her excited fancy as though some avenging angel stood at the door of her paradise with a flaming sword that turned every way.

She had no clue in her labyrinth of difficulty. Craig across the sea in India, and she lonely at Morningside, forbidden even to think of him except in her prayers; or else Craig at Brantwood or in London, and she at St. Breda's Lodge in an uncongenial environment. 'How is one to bear it?' she sighed at last, when, worn out by a sense of hopelessness and misery, she crept to her bed and sobbed herself to sleep.

Joan was no coward, she had plenty of pluck and spirit; but in youth one suffers terribly. Age at times forgets this. The young have not learned the true proportion of things, their perspective is often at fault, their molehills of difficulty seem to loom out of the distance like mountains, they can find no bridges for their rivers and foaming torrents, they cannot see the wood for the trees, the sunshine has gone. Will the skies ever be blue and clear again—will their young hearts ever again sing for joy?

Joan little guessed that the same thoughts had come

to Lady Mary, and that she had forborne to utter them for fear of adding to Joan's trouble.

'Poor little girl, she has quite enough on her mind now,' she thought; 'it would be cruel to put these unsettled ideas into her head. What was the use of worrying oneself about a thing which might never happen? What was that verse Craig once repeated to them when Joan was depressed about the future of a village lad in whom she was much interested, and who had run away to sea? Joan had copied it into her extract-book, and had often quoted it for her benefit.

> Some of your hurts you have cured,
> And the sharpest you still have survived;
> But what moments of grief you endured
> From evils which never arrived!'

'There is a mine of wisdom in that, isn't there, Aunt Mary?' he had observed in his cheery way. 'That old fellow, Emerson, knew a thing or two—I call that grand philosophy. Some people seem to me as though they were always looking round the corner with a spy-glass to watch for something unpleasant to happen.'

'I must not be one of those people,' thought Lady Mary, as she recalled Craig's boyish philosophy. 'And, after all, poor Arthur may live for years. I daresay Craig will go out to India, and do his road-making, and fight a battle or two before he has to give up soldiering. Oh dear, oh dear, if only Joan had money and a long pedigree!' For the thought of these young creatures, separated by unkind circumstances, lay heavily on Lady Mary's loving heart. But not for one moment did she flinch from the course of duty which her conscience prescribed.

Lady Mary had a reasonable, patient nature, and she made no great demands on life. In her youth she

had had a great sorrow, and she had been slow in recovering from it, but the years of her married life had been like some peaceful backwater. Then had come her widowhood, and her brother's loving care for her. She had gone back to her own people, and their cares and sorrows and joys had been hers. And then Joan had come, and the quiet rooms at Morningside had been illuminated with spring sunshine. Nevertheless, those seven years had not been free from trouble.

Lady Mary's nature was extremely sympathetic. When Archie and Clyde Bastow died, there was no one who could comfort the bereaved mother as Lady Mary could.

'Aunt Mary says very little, but she has such a soothing manner,' Dorothy once said to her friend Prudence Rutherford, the Rector of Herondale's sister. 'She never talks goody-goody like some folk, or pelts people with texts like old Mrs. Ramsden. She just makes them feel how sorry she is for them, and how she would bear it for them if she could, and that makes her such a pillow of comfort.'

'Texts are very nice,' returned Prudence thoughtfully, 'and one finds them useful if selected with discrimination; the mistake is when they are strung together loosely like beads. I remember a speech old Mrs. Gilbert made when Mrs. Ramsden had paid her a visit of condolence after her husband's death. You remember the deaf old man who was run over by a motor?' And as Lady Dorothy nodded—'"The textes were all very grand, but they did not seem to fit somehow, and they were buzzing in one's head like bluebottle flies. But then I have been dazed like since my old man left me. What is the use of hooting to deaf ears, Rector, I says, and then trampling on the poor old creature! But there,

when he has got over the shock a bit, I daresay he will be fine and glad to get rid of his rheumatism, and to be able to enjoy the grand music up there."' And Lady Dorothy had been much amused by this little anecdote.

Lady Mary was very humble in her opinion of herself. She used to take herself to task for her shyness. She had a reticent nature, and it was not easy for her to speak; sometimes the right word failed to come, and then she would remain silent.

When Josselyn began to tread the downward path, and poor Lady Merriton confided her heart-sick anxieties to her patient hearer, Lady Mary had pressed her hand gently.

'Yes, I understand; we can only pray for him, you and I—there is nothing else to be done'; and these words had sunk deeply into the mother's heart.

'Your Aunt Mary is a good woman, and I love her dearly,' she had said that night to Dorothy. Then Dorothy took her mother's hand and kissed it.

'And I shall love her better than ever for being so good to you, dear,' she said affectionately.

Lady Mary was none the better for her anxious, sleepless night, and as she dressed herself the next morning she was fully aware that the penalty would be paid in the shape of a severe sick headache, but she determined to fight against it as long as possible. She had to write that letter to Heath Leigh, and there was no time to lose. She was sure that Lady Merriton would implore her to send Joan away as soon as possible, and she meant to put off dining at the Abbey until Heath's answer reached her.

Joan looked at her anxiously as she entered the dining-room. 'You are going to have one of your

really bad headaches,' she said reproachfully, 'and you ought to be in bed.' And though Lady Mary could not truthfully contradict this statement, she only smiled faintly and rang the bell for prayers. She was not a woman to make much of a small ailment, and the letter was written, and two or three other pressing bits of business were settled, before increasing pain forced her to return to her room.

Joan had had luncheon at Herondale Rectory. She had promised to help Prudence Rutherford to mark and pack some articles for a sale of work in a poor East End parish. There were two or three pinafores to finish, and it was tea-time before the parcel was ready for the carrier; but Joan, who felt Lady Mary had been left alone long enough, refused her friend's pressing invitation to remain another half-hour.

It was a disappointment, therefore, when she reached Morningside to hear from Willis that his mistress was in bed, with Dunlop in attendance. Joan drank her solitary cup of tea, then she went up to see the invalid. She had always to be exceedingly careful when Dunlop was mounting guard. She was an excellent person and an admirable nurse, but she was somewhat tenacious of her privileges and inclined to resent any interference on Joan's part.

As Joan entered the carefully darkened room, Dunlop, who was bathing Lady Mary's temples with eau de Cologne and water, looked at the girl reprovingly. 'My lady is not fit to talk, Miss Joan,' she said tartly. But Lady Mary looked at her favourite with an attempt at a smile.

'It is only one of my stupid sick headaches, Joan. I did not sleep well last night, and now the pain will have its way. You will have a lonely evening, my

dear, for Dunlop is right and I cannot talk. I daresay I shall be all right to-morrow.'

'But I may come and wish you good-night?' However, before Lady Mary could answer, Dunlop struck in.

'You will excuse me, Miss Joan, that is what you may not do. In a couple of hours I shall be giving her ladyship some coffee, and later on Dr. Walton's composing-draught, and then I hope she will get some sleep.' Dunlop was so decided, and so unusually snappish in manner, that Joan was forced to beat a retreat.

She was certainly not in the mood for a solitary evening, and when dinner was over, and she had put Rascal through his usual programme of parlour tricks —Cocker never left his mistress when she was unwell —she was at a loss how to occupy herself. The idea of fancy-work was abhorrent to her; the piano would disturb Lady Mary, as her room was over the drawing-room; her book did not interest her; and the house felt like a prison. If she had only Dorothy to talk to her!

Then the door-bell rang, and she jumped up from her seat in some excitement. Dorothy now and then paid them a surprise visit in the evening. Good Dorcas, how delightful it would be to get her all to herself! Then the drawing-room door opened and Craig marched in. He looked rather taken aback when he saw Joan was alone. Joan's face had grown suddenly crimson, as she silently gave him her hand. At that moment she did not venture to speak.

'Where is Aunt Mary?' he asked quickly, looking round the room.

'Lady Mary has a bad sick headache and has gone to bed. I wonder Willis did not tell you.'

'Barton let me in, and I never thought of asking

him. Poor Aunt Mary! But I expect she will soon be all right.'

'Oh yes, her headaches seldom last for more than a few hours. She has just had some coffee, and by and by she will have a composing-draught, and then she will probably fall asleep.'

'Well, I am in luck's way, for I was just wondering how I was to get you alone for half-an-hour, and now there is no difficulty.' Craig was not speaking in his usual manner; he seemed nervous and constrained. 'Aren't you going to sit down?' But Joan shook her head. She must get rid of him. What would Lady Mary say?

'It is so late,' she returned; 'I think it would be better to talk another time.' Poor Joan, she was feeling very frightened and helpless. Craig was so masterful when he chose; he might refuse to go. He was looking at her now, and there was a frown on his brow.

'Look here, Joan,' he said obstinately, 'I am going to talk to you, and you have got to listen, and to answer one or two questions.

'My father has been speaking to me. The poor old man seems as upset as possible. Somebody has let the cat out of the bag, for he told me to my face that I had proposed to you, and that you had refused me —rightly refused me, were his words.'

Joan's head drooped as Craig's stern blue eyes were fixed on her; a burning blush came to her cheek.

'Oh, Craig, it was not my fault!' she exclaimed, unable to endure this. 'Some one had seen us in the wood, and Mrs. Flavel had talked to your mother, and then Lady Mary was told. She guessed things, and asked me questions, and I could not tell a lie—it was no use trying to hide it—and so I was obliged to

acknowledge the truth. Oh,' went on Joan desperately, 'you don't know how I hated it all—I never wanted any one to know! Oh, Craig, you do believe me?' Then Craig's sternness relaxed.

'I am not blaming you, Joan,' he said more gently. 'Did you think I was? I was only angry with these busybodies who have forced my hand. As far as I am concerned, the whole of Brantwood and Herondale and Atherton are welcome to know the fact that I am trying to win you. But I certainly wish that they had left my father in peace a little longer.' Then Joan breathed more freely. Craig was not blaming her—he knew it was not her fault.

CHAPTER VII

'WILL YOU TAKE BACK THOSE WORDS?'

> Something I must do individual
> To vindicate my nature, to give proof
> I also am a man.
>
> CLOUGH.

It is only with Renunciation that Life properly speaking can be said to begin.—CARLYLE.

THERE was a momentary silence. The two young people were still standing by the fireplace, but now Craig changed his position. Resting his arm against the mantelpiece, he shaded his face with his hand. He was watching Joan intently, but the girl was unconscious of this. The fire had suddenly blazed up rather fiercely, and she moved a little away from it.

Joan was looking very young and girlish in her simple white dress. Lady Mary always liked her to wear white in the evening; she said nothing else suited her so well. On her last birthday she had given her a set of turquoise pins for her hair, which looked like forget-me-nots and had a charming effect, but Joan had not cared to wear them this evening. She had fastened her pearl necklet mechanically, and without even looking at herself. The pearls had also been Lady Mary's gift. Joan always looked her best in

evening dress; she had such a pretty white neck, and her rounded arms were so finely proportioned, and in the lamplight her hair shone like gold. Without being handsome, she was very effective. But in Craig's eyes she was beautiful.

The silence and something electric in the atmosphere were making Joan nervous. She had not yet succeeded in sending Craig away. In her perturbation she tried to resume her old ease and air of camaraderie, but it was a sad failure.

'I hope your father was nice to you, Craig?' But she repented her friendly overture a moment later. Lovers have their own ideas of honesty; if you give them an inch, they take an ell. Craig's face brightened in an alarming way.

'That is kind of you, Joan, and shows that you have not lost all interest in me. Oh yes, he was nice and fatherly, but a bit heavy-handed and crushing. Oh, I did my best not to quarrel with him'—as Joan seemed rather frightened at this—'but I had to stand up for my rights as a freeborn Briton. You see, he wanted me to go his way and knock under to his ideas, which were not exactly mine. We had rather a scrimmage, and the dear old dad lost his temper and said some very unpleasant things.'

'Oh, Craig, I am so sorry!' and Joan's eyes were soft with sympathy. Craig gave her a quick glance and went on.

'His terms were simply impossible, and so I told him. He not only put down his foot and forbade me at my peril to renew my offer to you'—here Joan perceptibly started—'but he insisted that I must marry money. I had no idea that things were in such a mess,' Craig continued ruefully. 'I knew Josselyn was

going the pace, but he must be without conscience to run up all these beastly debts. If he lives much longer we shall all be as poor as church mice. Why, the poor old governor thinks he ought to sell the Grosvenor Square house.'

'Oh no, Craig, he must not think of that! What would your mother and Dorothy do?' For Lady Merriton always took her daughter to town for the season. The Earl would accompany them, but after a fortnight or three weeks he would make some excuse and return to his beloved Abbey, only paying them flying visits at intervals. Once, when his wife had ventured to remonstrate with him, he had answered her with unusual asperity.

'If you have any wish to shorten my life, you may press me to stay here; but I shall certainly have an attack of gout before many days are over.' And Lady Merriton was obliged to concede the point. But when Dorothy seemed inclined to follow the same tack, the Countess was inexorable.

'We owe our duty to society,' she said firmly. 'Do you think I am not tired too, sitting up night after night, and trying to make myself pleasant? We must just go through with it.' And no hints thrown out by anxious friends over Dorothy's languid and weary appearance changed this Spartan determination to do her duty.

Joan was very fond of the Grosvenor Square house. She had spent some very pleasant times there. Lady Mary had now and then taken her and Dorothy, when they were younger, for a week's sight-seeing. It was like a delightful picnic to the girls. All the best rooms were shrouded in holland. They took their meals in the library, which was the Earl's private sanctum.

Lady Mary always said she could not face the large dining-room. 'Fancy Joan and Dollie and poor me at one end of that long table! No, George, we are going to be comfortable. We will have cosy meals in the library, and we shall sit in Hildegarde's morning-room. There is no need for Mrs. Baddeley to uncover either of the drawing-rooms.' And of course Lady Mary had her way.

How Joan had loved those surprise visits! From morning to night she had been in the seventh heaven of enjoyment. Lady Mary knew what girls of their age would love. She took them to the Zoo, and to the Tate Gallery and the Wallace Collection, as well as to concerts and theatres. Once when the weather was fine they went to Hampton Court, and another time to Kew Gardens. On Sundays they haunted the Abbey. Dorothy had a perfect passion for the place.

'I wonder why you hate the season so much, Dorcas?' Joan would say rather wistfully, for she often wished herself in her friend's place.

'Oh, I don't know,' returned Lady Dorothy frankly, 'but I do hate it. It is the endless dressing-up, I suppose, and those tiresome balls. Just think, Joan, three in one evening sometimes; nothing but a crush of smart people, and hardly time for two or three dances, and then we move on to fight our way up a still more crowded stairway, with fresh programmes and introductions.'

'I should not care for three balls in one night certainly,' returned Joan thoughtfully.

'Oh, I think the first was a dinner or reception. Of course I had nice times between. My morning rides with father were delightful, and then there was the

opera and a good concert or two, and on Sundays I had the dear Abbey.'

Joan thought of these pleasant days regretfully when Craig repeated the Earl's speech.

'I hope your father will never make up his mind to do that,' she observed.

'Well, I don't know,' returned Craig dubiously; 'it is a huge barrack of a place, and Dorothy and I hate it. The rooms are too big for comfort, and it needs an army of servants to keep it in proper order. What is the use of keeping it just for two months in the year? We could take a furnished house for the season; or I daresay Uncle Templeton would lend us Park Lodge, he and Aunt Miriam are not always there in the season.'

Viscount Templeton was Lady Merriton's elder brother, and as his wife was in bad health and they had no family, the suggestion seemed plausible, though Joan regarded it with disfavour.

'I do think Lord Josselyn ought to be ashamed of himself,' she remarked severely.

'He has not been a credit to the family certainly,' returned Craig drily. 'But there, poor beggar, he's paying the penalty of his sins; he seems pretty bad, by all accounts. No wonder the governor was rather on edge. But I was not going to give in to him when he told me that I should have to marry money. I replied that the thing was impossible, as the only girl I wished to make my wife was absolutely penniless. You should have seen his face, Joan, when I said that. I thought he would have had a fit. He said something under his breath that I did not hear, and then remarked in an offended tone that we had better not talk any more until I had come to my senses. It was not

exactly a comfortable interview. Of course I knew all along what he was driving at. They want me to marry Lady Cicely—that is why they are always having her down here. They tried that dodge with Lady Marjorie and Josselyn, and he only laughed in their faces. But it does not amuse me,' continued Craig grimly; 'I mean to let them know that I intend to choose my wife for myself.'

'But, Craig'—here Joan pulled herself together and made a tremendous effort—'do listen to me a moment. You must not think me unkind or ungrateful if I say that your father and mother are right, and that Lady Cicely is the girl you ought to marry.'

'So that's your opinion, Joan,' in a hard sarcastic voice, 'and you are worldly-minded like the rest of them? Because Lady Cicely has a pedigree so long that she can trace her descent to some old murderous Irish king who, if the truth were known, was nothing but a bloodthirsty savage, and also has a decent pile of her own, she is a suitable wife for me!' But, though Craig's contemptuous tone was hard to bear, Joan bravely finished her say.

'Lady Cicely's good birth and wealth are, of course, in her favour, but she has far more to recommend her than that. If I were not a true friend, Craig, and did not wish you well from the bottom of my heart, I would not tell you all this. Dorothy and I know Lady Cicely better than most girls, and she is as nice and good as she is pretty.'

'And you wish me to marry her?' Craig's keen incisive tone made Joan wince, but she did not lose her courage.

'Your parents and Dorothy wish it,' she returned quietly, 'and that is more to the purpose; and I cer-

tainly advise you to do what they desire. I think—I am sure you would not repent it.' But Craig's answer to this took her by surprise. He strode across the rug that separated them and took her hands in a grasp that kept her a prisoner.

'You are not straight, Joan,' he said angrily, 'this is a mere evasion on your part. I will take no such advice from you. Look me in the face if you can, and tell me in cold blood if you really meant what you said in the Abbey woods that morning?'

'I don't think I quite understand you, Craig.' But Joan was telling a fib there; of course she understood quite well to what he was alluding, only in her flurry of mind she pretended ignorance.

'That you only cared for me as a dear friend——?'

'Oh no, I never said that,' she interrupted; but either she spoke in a low tone or he was too excited to heed.

'Yes, those were your very words, Joan. Do you think I am likely to forget them, when they hurt me so cruelly? And that you wished me never to speak to you in that way again. And I had just asked you to be my wife. You said you really meant it. Will you take back those words, Joan?' And as he said this, and she saw the intense anxiety in his eyes, Joan's heart sickened within her. She must be quick or her resolution would fail.

'No, I cannot take them back,' she said sadly, and there was not a vestige of colour in her face. 'I really meant them, and you must believe me—and forgive me if you can.'

Then he dropped her hands. 'Oh, that will be a hard task, I am afraid,' he said bitterly. 'You have not treated me well, Joan. I could have sworn that you

cared for me. Why did you let me think so? I never could have believed that you would have flirted with me, when I love you so truly!' But this stinging accusation roused Joan.

'I never flirted with you, Craig,' she said proudly. 'How dare you say such a thing! You were my dear friend—my very dear friend, and I delighted to be with you. Cannot a girl be friends with a man without being accused of flirting?'

'Forgive me, Joan,' returned poor Craig humbly; 'I ought not to have said it. But I am nearly beside myself that you should tell me to marry Lady Cicely.'

'I only meant it for your good,' replied Joan in a choked voice. 'I wanted to be kind and to help you. But please go—you must go, Willis is waiting to shut up the house.' And then Craig bade her a hurried good-night.

It was useless to say more. He had had his rebuff for the second time. But as he stood at the hall door looking down the dark drive, an inexplicable feeling came over him. Had she really meant it, or had some of them coached her to play a part? He would make some excuse and go back to the room. She would be taken by surprise, and perhaps the mask would drop off, if it were a mask. Here Craig's brow cleared a little. If he had followed his intention, he would have found Joan kneeling by the couch trying to stifle her sobs in the cushions, and then surely the truth would have been revealed to him. But the next moment he muttered angrily to himself, 'Only a dear friend—a very dear friend,' and the hall door was closed behind him. And after a few minutes Joan escaped to her room to indulge her grief more freely. They had quarrelled; Craig had misunderstood her, and she could never set

him right. He had said hard things of her, and she had not borne them meekly.

'Oh, if I had not mentioned Lady Cicely—it was that that made him so angry! And now it will be a long time before he will care to speak to me again.' And that night Joan felt as though her heart were broken.

When Lady Mary came down the next day in time for luncheon, looking rather pale and languid from those hours of severe pain, she thought Joan seemed rather silent and out of spirits, but she made no remark, and only chatted on indifferent subjects until they returned to the morning-room. But Joan was beforehand with her. She had no intention of keeping Craig's visit a secret, but at the same time she intended to say as little as possible about it. She was far too sore about the matter, and no sympathy could heal the wound of that miserable misunderstanding which she could have so easily set right with a word.

'Lady Mary,' she said quietly, 'you will be surprised to hear that Craig was here last evening. He never expected to find me alone, and was so sorry when I told him about your headache.' Then Lady Mary, who had just taken up the paper, laid it down again, and her face expressed concern.

'Craig! Dear me, how very awkward for you, my dear! But of course you told him that he must not stay?'

'Oh yes, I told him so at once. But I could not get rid of him for quite a long time. His father had been talking to him, and Craig seemed terribly worried. I had to tell him at last that Willis would want to shut up the house.'

Joan's frankness was quite intentional; she had no

wish to conceal from Lady Mary that the interview had not been brief. But she parried her next question.

'Was that all he said, Joan?'

'No, dear, he said a good deal; but you must forgive me if I tell you that I cannot repeat even to you what passed between us. He made me very unhappy—indeed at one moment we were on the verge of a quarrel. He said hard things to me which I do not deserve; but I think he was sorry for them afterwards. That is all I can say, Lady Mary.' But though Joan's explanation was meagre, there was a look of sorrow in her eyes that told Lady Mary a good deal.

Craig had behaved badly. He had taken advantage of her absence to repeat his offer. Of course he had been strongly tempted. But it was evident to her that Joan had behaved well.

She had made him so angry that he had said hard things to her—this surely meant that she had refused to listen to him? For the second time she had played her part heroically; but it had almost been too much for her strength. 'If only I had not had that headache!' thought Lady Mary; and then she made up her mind that Joan must go to St. Breda's Lodge as soon as possible.

CHAPTER VIII

'SIGNED, SEALED, AND DELIVERED'

How easy is the thought in certain moods of the loveliest, most unselfish devotion! How hard is the doing of the thought in the face of a thousand difficulties!—GEORGE MACDONALD.

We are never without a pilot. When we know not how to steer and dare not hoist a sail, we can drift. The current knows the way, though we do not. The ship of heaven guides itself, and will not accept a wooden rudder.—EMERSON.

CANON LEIGH did not keep them long in suspense. On Monday morning Joan recognised her brother's large characteristic handwriting, which Lady Mary often said was as clear as print; the tortoiseshell lorgnette which she carried for occasional use was seldom required when one of Heath's letters was before her.

Joan changed colour, but she made no remark as she took her seat, and the next minute Lady Mary handed her an enclosed note.

'That is for you, my dear,' she said with forced cheerfulness. 'Your brother seems to have written me quite a long letter, but we will compare notes presently.'

Joan had no fault to find with her letter; it was brief, but perfectly kind and brotherly.

'Lady Mary has given me a hint about the difficulty, and I think I can read between the lines,' he wrote; 'and I

certainly agree with her that, under the circumstances, it will be wise for you to pay us a long visit. Silence and I talked it over last evening, and she begs me to give you her sisterly love, and to tell you that your room shall be ready for you whenever you wish to come. We have seen very little of you the last year or two, so you owe us a lengthy visit. We will do all in our power to make your stay pleasant, my dear, and the children will be delighted to have you. Wanda quite flushed with pleasure when her mother told her. "I do love to have Aunt Joan," she said, "she is always so nice and interesting." I hope that little compliment will please you. Now you must write by return and let us know when we are to expect you. I am afraid my engagements will not allow me to fetch you, but I daresay Lady Mary will arrange matters satisfactorily.—Your loving brother, HEATH LEIGH.'

Joan handed over her letter for Lady Mary's perusal, but the latter did not follow her example. 'It is a very nice note,' she observed, 'and your brother's letter to me is both kind and sensible. Of course he is extremely concerned on your account; for, as he says, this sort of difficulty often leads to disunion and want of harmony in families, and that your present position with regard to the Abbey people must be simply intolerable. He thinks Craig has been extremely thoughtless and wanting in consideration—that he ought not to have spoken to you until he had had it out with his father. He seems rather annoyed with him, for he says it is all his fault that this trouble has arisen. I am afraid he is right. Craig is certainly a very headstrong young man.'

'I love him all the more for being headstrong and impulsive,' thought Joan; but happily she did not give utterance to this sentiment. Lady Mary was a little early Victorian in her ideas, and she might have been shocked.

'Your brother seems to think,' continued Lady Mary, 'that it would be as well for you to fix as early a date as possible; and if you do not mind, Joan, we might settle the day before I see Lady Merriton this morning. She has just sent me a note asking me to luncheon; she reminds me that you and Dorothy are lunching at the Rectory, and that I may as well give them the pleasure of my company.'

'I expect Lady Merriton wants to get you to herself for a long talk,' returned Joan quietly. 'Yes, dear, we will fix the day if you like; but there is no great hurry, is there? I shall have to pack, and see people, and say good-bye; for one cannot run away for three or four months without telling one's friends.'

Then Lady Mary hesitated. Heath had begged her to hasten on matters as much as possible. 'It will be very painful for you to part with Joan, even for a few months,' he wrote, 'and I quite know her feelings on the subject; let me advise you, for both your sakes, not to lengthen out the agony. Joan could slip away, and you could easily make excuses for her; but nothing will be gained by her staying on at Morningside.'

'Your brother thinks that you had better go to them as soon as possible, but of course I do not want to hurry you, Joan. This is Monday; shall we say a week to-day—that would give you plenty of time?'

'Yes, I think that will do,' but Joan's voice was a little hard; 'I shall certainly be thankful for a week's reprieve. You see, Lady Mary,' and here the girl looked a little proud and stiff-necked, 'when a person has done nothing wrong, and has been trying with might and main to set things right, it seems rather hard that she should be treated as though she were in disgrace. Of course I know Lady Merriton will

be anxious to get rid of me; but she is Craig's mother, not mine, and I do not owe her any duty.'

'Oh, Joan, my child, please do not take that tone! Lady Merriton is really very fond of you; I am sure you have never received anything but kindness and consideration from her.' Then, at this gentle reproof, Joan came down from her high horse.

'Yes, I know. But how is one to remember past blessings when one is so miserable? To-day week—Black Monday—we will consider that settled. Now, would you like me to write to Heath? I have just time before Dorothy comes.'

'Yes, I think that will be best,' observed Lady Mary cheerfully. 'Tell him that I will write later on to him.' Then, as they rose from the breakfast-table and Joan was about to leave the room, Lady Mary called her back. 'My darling,' she said fondly, as she stroked the fresh girlish cheek, 'I think you are behaving very well, and sparing me a great deal of trouble, and I am very grateful to you, my child.'

And then Lady Mary took up her housekeeping book and key-basket, and settled herself for a lengthy interview with her cook-housekeeper, Mrs. Hartley; for nothing less than an earthquake or some elemental cataclysm would have induced the members of Morningside to keep that excellent woman waiting. Mrs. Hartley was Lady Mary's right hand. She had been with her all her married life, and had insisted on following her to Morningside.

'It is no use your thinking your ladyship will be able to do without me,' she had observed, smoothing the front of her black silk gown, 'for I have no intention of leaving you.'

'But, my good Hartley, things will be very different

at Morningside from Roskill Priory. My income will be less, and——'

'I am not objecting to a change, my lady,' returned Mrs. Hartley firmly; 'it is good for every one now and then. And as it will be a quiet place and less work, I shall be content with half my present salary.' Mrs. Hartley never used the word wages. 'I have plenty of savings as it is, and when your ladyship has no more need of my services I shall just retire comfortably. But as to eating my bread and sleeping under another roof, and taking service under another mistress, the very thought seems to disagree with me. But there is his lordship at the gate, and I must not be keeping you any longer, my lady.' And Mrs. Hartley beat a hurried retreat.

'What am I to do, George?' asked Lady Mary piteously.

But the Earl's advice was very clear and to the point. Mrs. Hartley must certainly accompany her mistress to Morningside. Neither would he hear of curtailing her salary.

'Your income will be ample,' he said to her, 'and there will be no reason why you should not keep your old servants if they wish to stay with you. There can be no better way of spending money than in rewarding faithful service. Mrs. Hartley is a trump, and I mean to tell her so.'

Joan had only just finished her note to her brother when she saw Lady Dorothy coming up the drive, and opened the French window to admit her.

'You had better come in this way, Dorcas,' she observed. 'I am just going to put on my hat. Lady Mary is still busy with Mrs. Hartley. How nice you look in your new spring frock, dear—grey always

suits you ; and the cowslips in your hat have such a good effect.' But Lady Dorothy paid very little attention to these complimentary remarks. Her face wore a grave, perturbed expression.

'Please do not be long, Joan ; I want to talk to you, and Prudence will expect us by twelve.' Then Joan gave her a quick nod and ran off.

'Poor Dorcas, she looks bothered,' she said to herself; 'I suppose they have been telling her things. Well, I have not much comfort in store for her. I wonder what she will say when I tell her about next Monday. I think I shall leave her to begin the subject.'

But she had not long to wait. Before they had passed the mill Lady Dorothy stopped in the road and looked at her solemnly.

'Joan,' she said in a loud whisper, though no one was within earshot, 'this is a terrible thing that has happened!' The tone and the manner seemed to jar on Joan's overwrought nerves.

'Oh, don't make a Star Chamber matter of it, Dorcas, for pity's sake!' and Joan gave a husky little laugh. 'No one has committed murder, as far as I know.'

'And you can laugh — actually laugh!' And Dorothy's face was so tragical that it required all Joan's strength of will to refrain from hysterical mirth.

'How can I help laughing when you look at me with that woe-begone expression? I suppose you are going to tell me, like all the others, that Craig has behaved badly ; but if you do, I warn you that I shall defend him through everything. In my opinion'— defiantly—'he is just as splendid in his pluck and daring as any paladin or knight of old.'

Dorothy looked at her aghast ; she could hardly believe her own ears.

'You defend him? You think he was right to deceive us all and make love to you secretly, when he knew what father and mother would say?'

'No Dorcas, excuse me, that is certainly not my meaning. When I said I would defend him, I do not refuse to own that Craig has made a great mistake; but when you accuse him of deceit, I think you are misjudging him very cruelly. A man does not care to wear his feelings on his coat-sleeve. Still, as Heath and Lady Mary say, perhaps, under the circumstances, he ought to have spoken to his father.'

'There is no doubt of that,' returned Lady Dorothy with unusual spirit. 'Father is so hurt and downcast; he says he can make no impression on Craig. He seems to think nothing of our opinion, but is set on taking his own way.'

'I think your father was a little injudicious in his management,' returned Joan thoughtfully. 'You may take a horse to the water, but if he is not thirsty he will not drink. It was a wrong moment to tell Craig that he must marry money—he was far too sore and unhappy. If you will only leave him alone a little to pull himself together, he will come right in time. Craig has always been so good and reasonable.'

Lady Dorothy listened to this speech with inward amazement. Joan was always full of surprises, but this morning she failed to understand her at all.

She had come to Morningside brimful of love and sympathy for her friend. If Craig had misconducted himself, Joan had behaved as well as possible; she had refused to listen to him.

'She will not have me, Dollie. She says she will never marry me,' he had groaned the previous night. 'But I would sooner wait for her ten years than marry

any other girl.' And as Craig had said this, Dorothy had marvelled at Joan's indifference to her old chum. She had always seemed so bright and happy when Craig was with them, that more than once a doubt had crossed her mind if this free and unrestrained companionship were quite prudent. 'Supposing Joan were to care too much for Craig?' she would say to herself; but she had never guessed at the depth of Craig's infatuation for the girl. And now Joan was stating her opinion with the utmost coolness. But then Dorothy was no match for Joan's cleverness. Joan was still bent on defending Craig against the harsh judgment of his kith and kin, but at the same time she seemed to place herself in strange remoteness.

'Of course this has made me very unhappy, Dorcas,' she went on. 'It is sad indeed to be the cause of all this trouble; and if I am in any way to blame, I have certainly my full share of the punishment.'

'I am not blaming you, dearest; I think you have behaved as well as possible.'

'If my conscience would only endorse that——' began Joan ruefully, and then she checked herself. With all her longing for Dorothy's sympathy, it would not do to show her even a glimmer of the truth. Dorothy believed that she did not love Craig well enough to wish to be his wife—that she only regarded him as an old friend. Well, she must do nothing to remove this wrong impression. Lady Mary must be her only confidante. To her she had acknowledged the truth, and she knew well that the secret was safe in her keeping. So Joan broke off her sentence and set off a little breathlessly on another tack.

'Dorcas, we must not waste our time lamenting other people's mistakes, there is something I must tell

you. Do you know Lady Mary is going to send me away?' But Joan saw at once by her friend's expression that she had already had a hint of this.

'Aunt Mary said something about it to father; but there is nothing settled surely?'

'Ah, you are wrong there; it is "signed, sealed, and delivered" like the decree of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. I am to go to St. Breda's next Monday, and, as far as I can see, the visit is likely to be a long one.' Then Dorothy's face was very sad.

'Next Monday—oh, Joan, how terribly soon! I never realised such a thing for a moment. Do you mean that you are not coming back until Craig goes to India?'

Joan nodded.

'And if—if he were not to go?' But there was no answer to this. Joan had turned her face aside as though something in the hedgerow had attracted her attention.

'Oh, Joan, do speak!' and Lady Dorothy's soft eyes were full of tears. 'Do you mean that because Craig has done this you and Aunt Mary are to be separated, that you are to be banished from your home and made miserable, and——?'

'Don't, Dorcas—what is the use of talking about it! Don't you see the situation is impossible—that for Craig's sake, for everybody's sake, I must go, and the sooner the better? Heath has written very kindly. He says he and Silence will do all in their power to make me happy. But how can I be happy without you all, and with my dear Lady Mary missing me all day long!' finished Joan with a little sob which wrung Lady Dorothy's heart. 'There, for heaven's sake do not let us talk any more about it! I shall have to tell Prudence

that I am going away, and I don't want to make a goose of myself.' But Joan's lips were not steady as she searched in a little mossy nook for some violets which generally bloomed there in the spring. But her quest was vain. 'Some one must have been before me and picked them,' she said regretfully as she came back to Dorothy; and then for a time the two girls walked on in unbroken silence.

CHAPTER IX

'I HAVE LOST MY MAIDEN AUNT'

The men of real power are always men of one idea who send all the force of their being along one line; and it is possible for any of us to win a true success in life if we will early choose one sphere and persistently labour in it.—EMERSON.

Come home to us, your ain friends; it's better sheltering under an auld hedge than under a new planted wood.—ANON.

THE inhabitants of Herondale village thought themselves especially favoured by providence when the Rev. Morven Rutherford came to the Rectory, and though five years had elapsed since then, and they had had ample time 'to summer it and winter it,' as they say in Westmorland, and had, in Celtic language, 'tasted' the full flavour of his sermons, they had not yet changed their opinion. Indeed, it could not be denied that the Herondale folk were absurdly proud of their Rector, and that he was the ruling power of the place.

When a stranger, passing through the village, asked to see the church, a low and unpretentious building standing at the upper end of the green entirely surrounded by trees, the Rector's name was always brought forward before five minutes were over.

'No, there is not much to see, sir, and I would not

deceive you into thinking it is a show place'—this from Hiram Saunders, sexton and verger. 'No, there is nothing ancient about it—built in 1807. But we have a good warming apparatus; that is the Rector's doing, he doesn't hold with chilling bodies and only warming souls. Aye, he is a gradely man,' for Hiram was a Cumberland man. 'No empty benches since he came to Herondale; for he is a grand preacher, and folk come from miles round in their motors and carriages to hear him. Perhaps, if you are staying in the neighbourhood, sir, it would be worth your while to come over for a Sunday service. Oh, only just passing through—bird of passage like? But thank you kindly,' and Hiram beamed approval of the coin in his hand.

Or it might be some lady cyclist, hot and tired from a long spin down the dusty lanes, where the hedgerows were thick with the grey powdery dust, and the long straws from passing waggons floated from the lower branches of the trees, who stopped at Susan Bennet's neat-looking cottage to ask for a glass of milk.

'I am sure you are kindly welcome to the drink, miss,' observed Susan in her pleasant voice. 'And I could not think to be taking money for a trifle like that.' And there was something in Susan's expression that made the young lady hastily return the money to her purse. 'My master is cow-keeper up at Herondale Farm, and we have milk in plenty without paying for it. I think I saw you up at the church just now, miss? That was the Rectory, that low white house. But maybe you did not notice it? The Rector and his sister are very hospitable to strangers. If you had asked for a drink there, you would have had some of Mr. Rutherford's famous Hereford cider offered you, and you would have been asked to rest in the cool porch.'

'Oh, I could not have taken such a liberty,' observed the young cyclist nervously. She was a tired journalist, and the village of Herondale with its kindly-spoken folk seemed to her a veritable paradise. The little river winding across the wide open green, the two bridges with their narrow low arches, the tops of the piers overgrown with grass and flowering weeds, the grand oak which was the pride of the village, and the little white house beside it, the flocks of geese cackling in the sunshine, the trim cottages and blacksmith's forge and post office, all stamped themselves on her memory. Then, as she handed back the glass to Susan, she pointed with a smile to a tiny child in a blue pinafore with a mop of yellow curls. 'How pretty!' she half murmured. 'How I wish I could sketch that for a picture! It would be a perfect idyll.' For the little creature, who was too busy to notice the stranger, was industriously ironing some fallen and faded leaves with a toy flat-iron which was nearly lost in the small palm.

'Mummie,' she said presently in a tired voice, 'the 'ickle leaves will crumple, but me irons them hard.'

'Bless your sweet innocence!' exclaimed Susan in her motherly voice. 'Don't worry, Liz; mummie is just going to iron all the pretty pinnies, and Liz shall sit at the table and watch her.' And as Susan lifted the child in her arms the young journalist thanked her and mounted her bicycle.

'I shall describe that little tableau to Ralph,' she said to herself; 'it might come in handy.'

And she was right. The very next year a little picture at the Royal Academy attracted a good deal of attention. 'Falling Leaves' it was called. Liz and her yellow curls and blue pinafore were there; but the artist had

added a kitten dragging an old sun-bonnet by its string across the leaves. Mr. Rutherford pointed it out to his sister and Lady Dorothy.

'That reminds me of dear little Lizzie Bennet,' observed Prudence sadly. 'Ah, the picture is sold, Morven!' And she sighed again; for the sweet baby face no longer gladdened the mother's eyes—Susan's cherished darling had gone to that pleasant land where the leaves never fall or fade.

When the Rev. Morven Rutherford accepted the living of Herondale and Brantwood, his friends told him candidly that he was throwing himself away. He was a man who would make his mark in a London parish, and it was simply suicidal in their opinion to bury himself in a Surrey village. And perhaps at that time Morven Rutherford was disposed to agree with them; but only to his special chum, Richard Trafford, did he fully explain the matter.

'Beggars must not be choosers, Dick. It is not a bad living, and as long as I do not marry I shall hold my fellowship. It is the only thing to do.'

'You mean on your mother's and Miss Prudence's account?' returned his friend thoughtfully.

'Well, yes; I must find them a home, and the Rectory has great capabilities for comfort. My sister quite fell in love with the place. The village is very peaceful and pretty, and the country round is remarkably fine—wide heathery commons and fir forests with sandy lanes and wild ravines and winding paths bordered by bracken and brambles.'

'Yes, I know the sort of place; it would be a pleasant backwater existence for a tired worker, but for a man like you, Rutherford——'

'My dear fellow, if one is in earnest one can find

work anywhere, and under the circumstances it was the best thing to do.' And then Richard Trafford held his peace. He knew all about the family troubles—of old Mr. Rutherford's foolish and wrong-headed speculations, which had brought his wife and daughter to poverty. After his father's death Morven's first thought had been to find a fitting home for his widowed mother, who was an invalid and threatened with blindness; and when, two years later, the poor woman died peacefully with her son's hand in hers, the remembrance of her last speech to him must often have come back to him.

'God has been very good to me in giving me such a son. In spite of your poor father's death, we have been so happy. God bless my beloved children.' And then, as she motioned them to kiss her, her gentle spirit passed away.

No, certainly, if it had been a sacrifice, Morven Rutherford had never repented it. 'If one is in earnest one can always find work,' he had said to Richard Trafford, and his packed church and crowded services proved his post was no sinecure. How could there fail to be work when Aldershot was so near? Certainly the Rector of Herondale was a busy and contented man.

The friendship between him and Richard Trafford had commenced in their earliest Eton days, and in spite of long separations, owing to Richard Trafford's frequent absences from England, it had not cooled or lessened. Never were there two men more utterly unlike in character, temperament, and tastes, and yet, strange paradox, no two men could have been more congenial companions. Dick Trafford was a born loafer—even the Rector acknowledged this. His chief duties in life

were to explore hidden nooks and corners of strange countries, and to shoot big game wherever he could find it.

Now he would be on the rolling prairies in search of bison, or camping out in a log hut in Canadian forests with a rough settler or two. While the novelty lasted nothing came amiss to him—cutting down wood and clearing brush were mere pastimes. Then one morning he would buckle on his knapsack and bid his good comrades farewell. 'I have a spinster aunt in England —I dreamt of her last night—I accept the omen,' he would say. 'Dagon, you and I have our marching orders.' Dagon was a huge brindled bulldog of fearsome aspect, who kept watch over his master day and night, and had once saved his life. He was Dick's fetich, and in spite of his grim and repelling looks, he was a dog of gentle nature, and never picked a quarrel with any one unless he threatened to murder Dick. He was still young, though he looked like a canine Methuselah, and was often playful in a clumsy and lumbering fashion, and he had a singular partiality for kittens. This weakness led to a complication one day. That night Dick had dreamt of his spinster aunt, and the next morning told his mates that he was going back to the old country. He had been living with an old trapper and his deaf and dumb son in a forest clearing in Canada, and Dagon had conceived a warm friendship for a sandy cat and her family. He came at once to his master's whistle, but he looked dejected and anxious. A minute later Dick was surprised to see him slink back to the cabin ; but as he reappeared after a short interval, his master took no notice—for once he was lost in thought. Presently a weary 'glump' behind him, followed by a strangled mew,

roused him, and to his horror there was Dagon, hot, tired, and very uneasy in his conscience, looking at him with imploring eyes, while a small and unhappy kitten dangled uncomfortably from his mouth.

Dick regarded him sternly.

'Oh, you rascal — you confounded old thief! If you have not stolen the youngest but one baby from Mrs. Sandy!' But Dagon only dropped the kitten on the ground and thrust his big, clumsy head against his master's knee.

'Now what are we going to do with that motherless brat?' continued Dick, as the kitten, delighted with its liberty, rolled over on the leaves with intense enjoyment. 'Do you suppose I am going back two miles to restore it to Mrs. Sandy—that is like your cheek? And if we leave it here it will be killed as sure as fate by some evil beast or other. Oh, you villain—you unscrupulous and unmitigated villain! What do you say?—that the baby's weaned, and that Mrs. Sandy does not want it, and—oh, that's your meaning?' as Dagon, with a sob of suppressed emotion, took up the kitten gently and laid it at his feet. 'Confound you for an old meddler!' And then, without further talk, Dick dropped the kitten into his huge pocket, while Dagon uttered a hoarse bark of excitement, joy, and gratitude.

Dick said afterwards that he should write the story of the Canadian foundling and give the proceeds to the Waifs and Strays, but he never did it. In due time a cab conveyed him and Dagon and the sandy kitten to the house in the Regent's Park where the spinster aunt, Dick's sole remaining relative, lived. His Aunt Felicia had already made acquaintance with Dagon—though she always called him 'that dreadful dog' and requested her nephew to keep him at a distance—and

now he had decided to present her with the kitten. Kittens, especially when they become cats, are likely to be inconvenient travelling companions.

'Well, Emma,' to the respectable-looking parlour-maid who opened the door, 'you see I am taking you by surprise as usual. Where is Miss Graham?'

'Miss Graham! Oh, sir, haven't you heard the news? Mistress was married a fortnight ago, and she and the Canon have gone to Brittany for their honey-moon.'

Then Dick, too much amazed for words, sat down limply in the hall chair and took Dagon's thick head between his knees. Aunt Felicia married! Did ever a maiden aunt of fifty-eight do such an unprecedented thing?

'You had better come into the dining-room, sir, and Mrs. Murphy shall tell you all about it. It is a fortnight to-day, and mistress—Mrs. Ramsay her name is now—was wondering if her letter will have reached you.'

'No, I have heard nothing,' returned Dick gloomily. 'I'll just overhaul Mrs. Murphy and then go to my old diggings.' But when he left the modest house in the Regent's Park Miss Sandy was resting comfortably in Mrs. Murphy's ample lap. 'I will look after her, sir; she will take our old cat's place.' And then Dick, drawing a long breath of relief, applied himself to the task of consoling the bereaved foster-father.

Dick ate his dinner rather sulkily at his club that evening. He was ashamed to own even to himself how the news of his Aunt Felicia's marriage had bowled him over. In his casual, irresponsible way he had been very fond of the gentle little spinster who had opened her heart and home to him. Probably she would have

opened her purse too if Dick had needed it, but he had a sufficient little income of his own.

'There will always be a room for you, Dick, my dear,' she had said to him, 'a sort of *pied au terre* where you can rest when you are tired of wandering. It shall be kept aired and warmed, and you can take possession of it at an hour's notice.' And Aunt Felicia evidently meant what she said.

Dick's treasures and trophies were all housed in a big roomy attic, and were carefully dusted by Miss Graham herself. But this time there was no welcome for the wanderer, and that night Dick did not enjoy his pipe, and Dagon slept restlessly with one eye open because the sandy kitten was not reposing as usual on his huge back.

The next day the Rector of Herondale received a telegram which he took to his sister. 'Richard Trafford is in England and has wired that he will be down this evening. I suppose you could get a room ready?' Then Prudence, who was adding up her weekly bills, nodded. She was well used to these telegrams.

When Dick entered the Rector's study that evening with Dagon closely following him, Morven Rutherford thought he had never seen his friend so fit or in better condition. He looked as lean and wiry as a greyhound, and his handsome face was sunburnt.

'Why, Dick, old fellow, it does one's heart good to see you!' But Richard Trafford regarded him solemnly.

'My good friend,' he said sadly, 'I have come all these miles that you and Miss Prudence may sympathise with me in my affliction. I have had a blow, Rutherford—I have lost my maiden aunt!'

CHAPTER X

AN ANCIENT IDYLL

'Do you think of the days that are gone, Jeanie,
As ye sit by your fire at night?
Do ye wish that the morn would bring back the time
When your heart and your step were so light?'

'I think of the days that are gone, Robin,
And of all that I joyed in then;
But the brightest that ever arose on me,
I have never wished back again!'

ANON.

DICK TRAFFORD'S lachrymose expression was so droll that the Rector laughed in his pleasant way. 'Take your own seat, Dick, and help yourself from the old red tobacco-jar on the mantelpiece, and we will tell you all about Miss Graham's marriage. I suppose you have missed her letters? Ah, here comes Prudence to welcome an absent friend. Prue, my dear, Trafford is a little mystified about the Graham-Ramsay marriage. A rolling stone gathers no moss, as I often tell him, and his aunt's letters have not reached him.' Then Miss Rutherford looked at Dick very kindly.

'Oh dear, what a pity! Miss Graham told me herself that she had written to you to inform you of her engagement to Canon Ramsay, and that she felt

sure you would be intensely surprised. "I think he will understand everything when he reads my letter, for I have made it all quite clear to him; and if he thinks me an old fool for marrying at my age, he will just say so, for Dick and I always tell each other the truth."'

'That's so.' But Dick's tone was gloomy, and Prudence went on.

'It was a very short engagement—only six weeks; and of course the wedding was as quiet as possible. I saw Miss Graham two or three days previously, and she had just written to you again, as she could not be sure of a letter finding you. She said she should write from St. Malo, and send it under cover to the Rectory.'

'But she has not done so yet, my dear,' observed the Rector.

Morven Rutherford was not a handsome man, but he had a striking personality that always made an impression on people. He was tall and athletic-looking, his features were strongly marked, and his expression was good. But his voice was his chief attraction; it was so deep and pleasantly modulated that if strangers heard it in the street they always turned round to look at the speaker.

Lady Merriton, who was very cultured and had a fine ear for music, always said it was a treat to hear the Rector intone the service or read the Lessons. 'He is perfectly simple,' she remarked once, 'and there is no straining after effect, but he evidently realises the meaning of every word. When he read that chapter about Joseph, I could hardly control myself over old Jacob's lament: "For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning." I saw poor Susan Bennet put her handkerchief to her eyes.'

Prudence Rutherford was rather a plain young woman; she had slightly prominent teeth, but she had bright eyes, and such a good-humoured, animated expression that people never criticised her looks.

'She is a homely body,' Susan Bennet would say, 'but she is worth her weight in gold, and a solid lump of comfort when one is in trouble. Neither my master nor me will ever forget her goodness to us when dear baby died. She fairly cried over us both.

'"I shall never have a child of my own, Susan," she said to me, "but I think I love all children more and more as I grow older. And Liz, bless her heart, was such a darling! But now she has all the angels to pet her instead of her mother." I do think that was so sweet of her to say that.'

Prudence was one of those sensible, satisfactory people who never waste words; she could tell a story briefly and concisely without unnecessary digressions or voluminous padding, and she soon made things clear to Dick's puzzled brain. After all, it was perfectly simple to any one conversant with Felicia Graham's past history. When she was a girl in her teens she and Canon Ramsay—only he was a hard-working young curate then—had been engaged. At that time Felicia's parents had not been averse to the engagement; but later on, when their circumstances became involved, Captain Graham, who was in the navy, expressed himself rather strongly on the subject of beggarly curates, and told his wife that she was greatly to blame in promoting the match, and that no daughter of his should be brought to poverty. When Captain Graham retired from the service there was an end of all peace for poor Felicia. Suppressed gout and a naturally irascible temper made the Captain a trying

inmate in a small house, and Mrs. Graham had hard work to preserve peace.

To make a long story short, as Prudence was doing, such pressure was brought to bear on Felicia that the girl, who had always taken the fifth commandment literally, was induced to give up her lover; but from that day the joy and sweetness of her girlhood were over.

'You may tell my father that I will obey him, though I think he is very cruel to me and Alick, but I will never marry any one else.' And Felicia kept her word. She was a pretty creature, and more than one desirable suitor came to the Captain's house, but she would have nothing to say to them. And when her father began to bluster after his usual rough fashion, she checked him with such dignity and spirit that he was as astonished as if a dove had flown in his face.

'Father,' she said, 'there is no reason for this unseemly language. I am no longer a child to be threatened and coerced. I have obeyed you and given up Alick, but no power on earth could induce me to marry another man while he is living.' And for once in his life the Captain held his peace.

Alick Ramsay was a long time getting over the loss of his sweetheart, for he had been truly and sincerely attached to her. But he was too proud to make any further attempt to change her resolution. A few years later he married the eldest daughter of his rector, and from that day his fortunes mended.

He and Felicia never met, but now and then she had indirect news of him when the living of St. Saviour's, Margate, was given to him. And she also saw in the paper the birth of his three sons. Felicia told herself

humbly that it did not matter if her own life was joyless, as all was certainly well with Alick. He had a good wife, three sturdy boys, and plenty of loaves and fishes.

After her parents' death Felicia's fortunes improved a little. She had some money left her, and also a small but exceedingly comfortable house in the Regent's Park. Her only brother, Dick's father, was also dead, and Felicia, who was otherwise lonely, determined to make a home for Dick. This part of Felicia's life was certainly not unhappy. In a great measure she had forgotten the trouble of her youth, and Dick's erratic visits brought plenty of interest into her life.

About a year before Dick went off for his last trip to Canada, two events befell the Rev. Alick Ramsay: he was made one of the St. Breda's canons and he lost his excellent wife. As his three sons were all abroad in different professions, he was a lonely man. Then, without warning—by pure accident as some people say, or by providential guiding in the wiser opinion of others—he and Felicia came face to face in a crowded and difficult crossing by the Mansion House. Canon Ramsay had been a widower a twelve-month then, and they had not met for thirty-seven years.

For the first minute neither recognised the other. Canon Ramsay was too busy piloting the frightened little well-dressed lady to a place of safety. Felicia, who was breathless and panting, could hardly express her gratitude fittingly to the tall, white-haired clergyman who had been her angel of deliverance from enormous dray horses and snorting motors.

'There, you are all right now, but it was a near shave! Good heavens, can it be Felicia Graham?' in

a tone of intense amazement that brought back the old girlish flush to Felicia's pale cheeks.

Yes, it was Felicia without doubt; the delicate prettiness was still there—a little faded and worn perhaps. The brown eyes did not sparkle as they used to do, and Felicia had grown sedate and old-maidish, while the soft, mouse-coloured hair was quite grey under the little close bonnet. Felicia was too early Victorian to indulge in toques; she liked wide bows of silk or lace under her little pointed chin.

When Canon Ramsay uttered his surprised remark, Felicia's startled eyes expressed no recognition. The tall stooping figure, the white hair, the deeply-furrowed brow failed to recall the vigorous, athletic young curate with his dark, closely-cropped head.

'Oh, impossible,' she murmured, 'you cannot be Alick Ramsay!' But he soon proved to her that he was.

Canon Ramsay was staying in town on important business, but he found time to call frequently at the house in the Regent's Park. Now and then he would take Felicia to the Zoo to listen to the band; there were quiet shady corners where old friends who had been long parted could talk and compare notes. Canon Ramsay had much to say about his excellent Charlotte. One day he brought Felicia a photograph which he said was lifelike. Felicia looked rather curiously at the stout, handsome woman who looked so commanding in her black velvet. It was a kind, good face, she thought, but she liked best to hear about the three sons.

Canon Ramsay had plenty to say about them. They were all good, true-hearted lads, and were doing their father credit.

Malcolm, the eldest, was with his regiment in India; Walter, who had an excellent berth as Inspector of Native Schools, was also in India; and not long before his mother's death Basil had gone out there as a missionary.

'He is the one who will feel his mother's death most,' observed the Canon softly, and something in his tone told Felicia that this son was his Benjamin.

These confidences were very sweet to Felicia, and she did not stint her sympathy. The revival of the old friendship had brought her a strange feeling of happiness. The old sense of loneliness ceased to trouble her in Alick's presence.

And then one day he spoke.

'Felicia,' he said, turning to her quietly, 'we are growing old, you and I, and we are both lonely. Why should we not be together for our remaining years? The world may call us old fools perhaps, but it does not know that we are old lovers. Shall it be so, dear?' And though Felicia was too much agitated to give an immediate answer, she did not long withhold her consent.

'I have loved you all my life, Alick,' she said to him the next day; 'why should I deny myself the happiness of caring for you and your comfort because people may laugh at us? Are you sure that your sons will not object to a stepmother?' But Canon Ramsay reassured her on this point.

After this Felicia made no more difficulty. Kenwyn, Canon Ramsay's house at St. Breda's, was ready for its mistress, and Felicia would keep her house at the Regent's Park. Alick thought it comfortable and liked the situation, and Dick could still make it his headquarters. Felicia set about her preparations in a

sensible, middle-aged fashion. She would not have confessed to any one with what heart-beats and flutter she looked at the silvery-grey folds of her wedding dress. When Alick told her, as they drove away from the church, that she looked twenty years younger, quite a girlish flush came to Felicia's face.

Was she really fifty-eight? she wondered, and were the best years of her life gone? What did it matter after all! The vintage was late, but the wine that filled her cup was still good; the aftermath was rich and abundant; and though another woman had been the mother of his children, Felicia would have the privilege of walking with him hand in hand down the slow, difficult slope of the hill towards the sunset.

Dick drew a long breath and filled his pipe afresh with the Rector's excellent tobacco as Prudence finished her story, but he made few comments.

'My maiden aunt seems to have feathered her nest very comfortably,' he said cynically; 'but I wonder where I come in. I must overhaul that room full of rubbish and warehouse it.' But when the Rector suggested that he should settle down in diggings of his own, Dick did not seem to see it.

He was rather thoughtful for a day or two, and loafed about the village in an aimless manner, talking to every man, woman, and child he met in his usual fashion; and if any small boy seemed on the verge of a fit at the sight of the bulldog, he would pat his head in a friendly fashion and advise him to fetch a kitten—any kitten would do, black, white, or sandy—and the fearsome beast would be propitiated. Dick was a little puzzled one day when Jimmy Turner received this piece of advice with tempestuous weeping. 'Don't want my kit eaten,' he sobbed; and with some difficulty Dick

discovered that Jimmy thought that kittens furnished Dagon with his favourite food. The idea fairly shocked Dick.

'Why, bless your heart, laddie, he loves them—he would not hurt one for the world! Just you watch and see how pleased he will be!' Then there was quite a crowd of white-headed urchins to witness the novel sight.

Dagon was in the seventh heaven after this. Every cottage furnished him with a playfellow. Now and then he would steal one and appear with it at the Rectory. But his master always sternly insisted on his returning it to its rightful owner.

When Dick Trafford had been at the Rectory three days the promised letter from St. Malo arrived. Prudence took it to him at once.

Dick's sunburnt face reddened a little when he saw the handwriting. It was just such a letter as a warm-hearted woman would write; and it told him all that he needed to know—that she had done the right thing and that she was perfectly happy.

I tell you all this, Dick, because we are such friends, and I don't want you to be shocked or sorry the least little bit. Nothing will be changed, dear. I am keeping on the Regent's Park house, and Mrs. Murphy will take care of it. Your room will always be ready for you, and if we are not there, Mrs. Murphy will do her best to make you comfortable. The only difference is that you will have two homes instead of one; for there is a room at Kenwyn which is to be called yours—my husband insists on it. The house is not small. He never likes people to use his sons' rooms unless absolutely necessary; but he tells me there is one which will fit up nicely for you, and I mean to see about it as soon as possible. You must promise to occupy it, Dick. Do, my dear, for the sake of your ever loving aunt,

FELICIA RAMSAY.

When Dick handed this letter to his friend, the Rector perused it with much interest.

'Do you know, Dick,' he observed seriously as he replaced it in the envelope, 'I think your aunt is an exceedingly good sort?'

'That's so,' returned Dick with a satisfied smile; and then he stretched out his hand for the red tobacco-jar.

CHAPTER XI

HERONDALE RECTORY

Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State. A great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged. In a piece of machinery, too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the motion of the large obvious ones.—GEORGE ELIOT.

Cheerfulness throws sunlight on all the paths of life.—RICHTER.

As Lady Dorothy and Joan stood for a moment in the Rectory porch, they had a full view of the little square hall with its crimson carpet and old oak settles which were the admiration of all the Rector's friends. On cold wet days there was always a bright fire burning in the old-fashioned tiled fireplace ; but, except in winter, the front door was never shut from morning to evening.

'I am always at home to my friends and neighbours without ceremony or red tapeism,' Morven Rutherford would say. And many a piece of village business was comfortably settled in the Rectory hall over a pipe or a glass of sparkling cider.

As the girls crossed the hall, Prudence came through a little glass corridor full of flowering plants and ferns which led to the Rectory garden, carrying a bowl of

wallflower which she deposited carefully on the side table.

'You two dears,' she exclaimed in her friendly way, 'you are punctual to a moment! I have just finished my household labours, and was coming to the Green to meet you. Now, shall we go to the workshop as usual until luncheon?' But Prudence hardly needed Lady Dorothy's nod of acquiescence. She and Joan were busily occupied in taking out hatpins and straightening themselves and their stray locks at the oval glass which hung between the barometer and the grandfather's clock.

Prudence's workshop, as she always called it, had been her mother's room, and had at one time opened into the study, but by mutual consent it had been long blocked up by bookcases.

It was a very comfortable room, low, but well lighted. A tapestry cloth covered the solid oak table, where Prudence pasted and mended the broken covers of old schoolbooks, or repaired dilapidated toys and injured dolls. In the low oak cupboards which flanked either side of the fireplace Prudence kept quite a store of doll's heads and eyes, and sawdust for limp and wasted limbs. How the sad baby faces would dimple with smiles when that miracle-worker, Miss Rutherford, restored their beloved Jemima or Susannah with new staring blue eyes and freshly-rouged cheeks, and an emaciated frame restored to its old plumpness! When little Tim Halloway received his tailless monkey with a splendid furry appendage to it fashioned out of an old stole, his awe and delight deprived him of all power of speech, and hardly needed his mother's interpretation.

'He is fairly beside himself with pleasure,' Miss

Rutherford. 'You would never believe how he has been grieving for the creature. We have had to let the kitten sleep with him these two nights, for nothing else would quiet him. "I wants my Jacko—I can't sleep without my dear Jacko!" was all his cry.' Then Tim, hugging his newly-restored treasure in his fat arms, was borne off smiling like an infant seraph. No wonder the children of Herondale loved the Rector's sister.

A comfortable Chesterfield couch which had been appropriated to Mrs. Rutherford's use still retained its old position by the garden window, but it was seldom used except by Prudence's visitors. Miss Rutherford's robust health and energetic habits rarely needed such indulgence. But it was Lady Dorothy's favourite seat.

'Are you very busy this morning, Prue?' she asked, as she leant back against the cretonne-covered cushions with a sigh of content.

'No, not particularly. I meant to get you both to help me cover the new library books; but there is no hurry, and I daresay Mr. Trafford will be good-natured and come to my assistance this evening. He is the handiest man I know, and he does things so neatly.'

'I had no idea you had Mr. Trafford here,' observed Lady Dorothy in an interested tone; and then Joan, who had been silent, looked up with some degree of animation. Both the girls liked Dick Trafford and were on excellent terms with him, and were always pleased when he paid his rare visits to the Rectory.

'The men folk are out of the house just now,' returned Prudence; 'they have gone up Sudlow Hill for a walk, and of course Dagon is with them. Mr. Trafford only arrived two nights ago. He was a little

upset at hearing about his aunt's marriage. Miss Graham's letters had missed him, so he telegraphed and came down here as usual. He and Morven have been talking morning, noon, and night.'

'Well, leave your bookbinding for the evening, Prue. A little work will be good for Mr. Trafford, and neither Joan nor I are in an industrious mood.' Then Prudence, whose bright eyes had already noticed that both girls looked tired and unusually grave, brought her knitting-basket to the couch, and producing a half-finished navy blue comforter, pronounced herself ready for any amount of talk.

'I hope there is nothing wrong, Dorothy?' she asked rather anxiously—'that Lord Josselyn is no worse?'

'I trust not. We have not heard since last Monday. But poor mother is sleeping badly just now. I am afraid both she and father are worrying themselves a good deal about Arthur. There is something else we have to tell you, Prue. Joan is going away next week to stay at St. Breda's Lodge, and I don't believe we shall see her back again for months.' Dorothy spoke in a depressed tone. But though Joan flushed a little at Prudence's scrutinising glance, she answered quite calmly.

'Dorcas is good enough to say that she will miss me; but Lady Mary thinks that I ought to accept Heath's invitation. I have certainly treated him and his wife very shabbily this year.'

'But what will Lady Mary do without you?' asked Prudence quietly. 'Dorothy and I always notice how restless and uneasy she is during your absences, short as they are. But to leave her for months—oh, Joan, is it really necessary?' and there was such understand-

ing and sympathy in her voice that Joan faltered a moment. But she was spared the necessity of answering.

'Dear me, Prue,' exclaimed Lady Dorothy in an annoyed tone, 'there is that tiresome Miss Emma Joy coming up the front garden! If she sees you she will keep you talking for an hour. Shall I tell her you are engaged this morning?'

'It will be very kind of you, Dorothy. Tell her I could see her about the same time to-morrow.' Then Lady Dorothy nodded and left the room.

'Emma will be too much in awe of her ladyship to force her way in,' observed Prudence. 'She is a very chattering little person, and often tries my patience.' Then her voice changed into unusual earnestness. 'Dear Joan, while we are alone, let me tell you how grieved I am for you and Lady Mary—how truly I sympathise with you both. No,' as Joan drew herself up rather proudly, 'I am asking no questions. I do not need to ask them; Mrs. Flavel has been here as well as to the Abbey. Poor woman, you have no idea how distressed she was. She said over and over again that you and Captain Bastow would never forgive her, but that she must do her duty. You know what a good, conscientious sort she is.' But as Joan could not truthfully subscribe to this, she wisely held her peace.

'I must go, Prudence,' she said under her breath; 'Lady Mary says that it is not possible for me to remain at Morningside just now. There, I have told you this because you seem to know things, but I do not want to talk about it. One must do what is right even if one has to suffer.' Then Prudence gave the girl's hand an affectionate little squeeze.

'Dear Joan, that is so brave of you! Yes, one can only do the right thing and leave the rest with

providence. In this poor old world of ours one has to grope one's way sometimes, until the light comes. "Follow the gleam," as Morven says sometimes.'

But Joan remained silent; she could see no gleam of hope at present and the path looked dark before her. Nevertheless, Prudence's sympathy and squeeze of the hand had done her good. At least her friends respected and trusted her. Even Dorothy, who knew so much, had no word of blame for her, and all this was very soothing to Joan.

When Lady Dorothy returned a few minutes later with her errand successfully accomplished, she was followed by Richard Trafford and Dagon, who both considered themselves free of the workshop.

Joan's tired young face lit up with something of its wonted animation as she shook hands with her old acquaintance and made friendly overtures to Dagon. 'I hope he and Rascal will keep the peace,' she observed anxiously. But Dick assured her that Dagon regarded all small dogs with indifference bordering on contempt; that no dog was less aggressive or of gentler disposition; that his grotesque and repellent aspect was entirely misleading, and disguised a nature brimming over with loving-kindness. Thus did Dick eulogise the faithful friend who had once saved his master from the assassin's knife.

Richard Trafford admired Joan immensely—he always maintained that they were kindred spirits—but it had never occurred to him to fall in love with her. Dick had had one solitary romance in his wandering life, which had ended disastrously. About five years before, he had been desperately in love with the daughter of a Canadian farmer, and the attachment had been so strong on Dick's part that he seriously

contemplated investing his little capital in the purchase of land and settling down in Canada with Nellie Montrose as his wife.

Nellie was a beautiful girl and she had many lovers, but Dick's handsome face and powers of persuasion made him a successful wooer; and if he could have married her then and there, she would certainly have made him a good wife. But business obliged him to return to England for a month or two, and during his brief absence a young farmer who had been courting Nellie induced her to marry him.

It was a bad business, and Dick never cared to recall that time. When he rode up to the log house no 'queen of curds and cream' smiled at him from the porch. Nellie, in her corn-blue linen gown, with her yellow hair and her breast-knot of golden buttercups, was in her husband's cottage not half a mile away. But Dick swore savagely to himself that he would never look on her fair face again. 'She has fooled me, but one can't revenge oneself on a woman,' thought Dick, who, in spite of his loafing propensities, was a true-hearted gentleman. Probably, though he never knew it, he had his revenge, for poor Nellie had reason to repent that hasty marriage. Bob Staplegrove was neither steady nor hard-working, and there were troublous days before Nellie and her children.

Dick's entrance into the workshop had created a diversion, and before long they were summoned to the luncheon-table, where the Rector awaited them. Luncheon at the Rectory was always a cheerful and informal meal, and it was so on this occasion. But though Mr. Rutherford talked as much as usual—arguing with Dick and discussing the last new book with Lady Dorothy—he had quietly noted two facts—first,

that Joan had been shedding tears; and secondly, that Lady Dorothy looked worried and out of spirits. He therefore took an opportunity as they rose from the table, and the other three were looking at an India-rubber plant in the dining-room window which was causing Prudence some anxiety, to ask Lady Dorothy quietly what was amiss. 'I am afraid something is troubling you both,' he said in his pleasant voice; 'Miss Leigh does not seem in her usual spirits.' Then Lady Dorothy's eyes filled with sudden tears. Mr. Rutherford was a friend of the family, and he was so kind and sympathetic.

'Oh, if only I could tell you about it!' she said impulsively. 'But Joan would not like it. She made me promise not to say much even to Prudence.'

'Then I will ask no troublesome questions. But probably Prudence and I are not quite in the dark; Mrs. Flavel was here the other afternoon.' Then Dorothy looked at him piteously.

'Oh, I see that you know all about it; but Joan will question me, and I must be careful. This one thing I may tell you—that poor Joan will have to go away for some time, and she and Aunt Mary are so unhappy about it. They are doing it for our sakes, and because Craig has behaved so foolishly.' Then the Rector's face looked a little grave.

'Do not blame your brother too much, Lady Dorothy. No doubt he was strongly tempted; and I can answer for one thing, that he meant to be straight, although he may have tangled things a bit. Of course I see the difficulty; but I think Miss Leigh is acting very wisely in leaving Brantwood for a time.'

'Oh, I was sure you would say that. Poor dear Joan, I think it must comfort her a little to feel she

is doing the right thing; but it does seem so hard for her.'

'Doesn't it strike you that it is a bit hard on Captain Bastow too? I confess he has a good share of my sympathy. But, dear Lady Dorothy, they are both young and we must not lose hope. There are hard places in life, God knows, for most of us—difficult little bits of climbing that test our strength and manhood—aye, and womanhood too. Many have to pass between lions before they can enter their Palace Beautiful, and sometimes'—here the pleasant voice grew deep and vibrating—'sometimes, dear friend, the lions are not chained.'

Something in the Rector's tone seemed to thrill Lady Dorothy, as though there were some occult meaning in his words. Then, as she met his quiet kindly glance, she thought it must be her fancy.

'I suppose one must try to make the best of it,' she said simply.

'I think that would be wisest,' he said, smiling at her. And at this moment the others rejoined them.

The girls did not stay long after this. Joan had promised to be back for tea and Lady Dorothy had an engagement. The two gentlemen walked across the Green with them, and before they parted Mr. Rutherford found an opportunity of saying a word to Joan.

'I hear that I am to lose one of my workers,' he said, as they crossed the little bridge. 'I need not tell you that all your Herondale friends will miss you sadly.'

'You and Prudence are very kind,' returned Joan in a low voice. 'I shall not stay away longer than I can help, you may be sure of that.'

'Lady Dorothy seemed to think that you would be

away for three or four months. I heard her tell Mr. Trafford so.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Then we must do all in our power to cheer Lady Mary up. After all, Miss Leigh, it is an ill wind that blows no one any good—your brother will be the gainer.' But Joan made no audible response to this. They had paused here, for the Rector was on his way to the school. Lady Dorothy and her escort were walking slowly towards them.

'I must leave you now,' he said, putting out his hand to the girl. 'If I do not see you again before you go, will you let me wish you God-speed now, and tell you how gladly we shall welcome you back?' and his firm, kind pressure was very comforting to Joan.

He had not said much to her, but something in his tone and manner seemed to signify that he understood and approved of her course of action. As soon as they were alone Lady Dorothy linked her arm in Joan's.

'I hope Mr. Rutherford was nice to you, dear?' she said affectionately.

Joan nodded.

'He is never anything else, Dorcas; and I think he is sorry to lose me. I don't suppose I shall be at the Rectory again before I go.' And then by tacit consent the subject dropped, and for the remainder of the walk Lady Dorothy talked chiefly of their increasing anxiety on Lord Josselyn's account.

CHAPTER XII

'IT IS THE WISDOM OF THE SERPENT'

> Just a path that is sure, thorny or not . . .
> Just plain duty to know, irksome or not,
> And truer and better to grow in doing the duty I know.
> Just to keep battling on, weary or not;
> Sure of the Right alone as I keep battling on,
> True to my thought.
>
> WALTER SMITH.

JOAN had other visits to pay. She and Lady Mary had a good many friends in Atherton and some of the neighbouring villages. As there were few houses within walking distance, Lady Mary proposed that they should drive to them together.

'You know I owe Mrs. Ogilvie and the Farquharsons a visit,' she said by way of excuse. But in reality she could hardly bear the girl out of her sight those last few days, and Joan was far too thankful for her company to offer any objection to this. Lady Mary, with all her other-worldlinesses, had plenty of *savoir-faire* and tact; she knew how to pilot her young companion across any awkward bit of road. When Mrs. Ogilvie, a good-natured, rather stupid woman, asked curious questions which made Joan's cheeks burn, Lady Mary changed the subject so deftly that

no one suspected her cleverness. But she was very severe on Mrs. Ogilvie afterwards.

'She is an amiable, good-hearted woman,' she observed, as the carriage turned out of the gate, 'but it is a pity that she is not better bred. It is the hair on the foot, as my dear Sir Martin used to say, and every one knows that she is not her husband's equal.' And Joan assented to this quite warmly, for she and the courtly old General were on excellent terms.

Joan had one ordeal to face—the Thursday dinner at the Abbey. Lady Mary had brought her a gracious message from Lady Merriton, that she would expect to see her as usual.

'Are you quite sure she really wishes me to go?' asked Joan anxiously. And Lady Mary had assured her that nothing could have been kinder than Lady Merriton's manner.

'She seems very much pleased with you,' she continued, looking fondly at her favourite; for nothing gave her greater pleasure than to say smooth, comfortable things when she could do so truthfully. But if this were impossible, she always held her peace, which proved not only her wisdom but her real Christianity, it being a known fact that we cannot love our neighbour and do him mischief at one and the same time.

Joan showed no special gratitude for Lady Merriton's kind message. She had not seen her for more than ten days, for the Countess rarely came to Morningside except by special invitation.

'If only one could get a sick headache when one needed an excuse!' she said rather ungratefully to Lady Dorothy on Thursday morning. But her friend looked a little hurt.

'Oh, Joan, what a thing to say, when we all mean

to be so kind to you!' But Joan was not in the least penitent.

'I can't help it, Dorcas; I perfectly dread the evening. I feel bristling all over with nerves like a fretful porcupine. I know I shall contradict your mother or do something dreadful.'

'But, my dear child, why should you put yourself into such a state? Of course Craig will not be there—mother has taken good care of that.' But this was only like flinging the proverbial red rag in the eyes of an infuriated young bull.

'If Craig were to be there, nothing would induce me to cross the threshold of the Abbey!' returned Joan shortly, and she walked away without another word.

Dorothy had said the wrong thing. 'Did they think—did they really think that she expected to meet him!' thought Princess Joan, with a toss of her head.

Lady Dorothy wisely took no offence at Joan's brusquerie and snappishness, which she knew were nothing but nervous irritability.

'Poor dear Joan,' she sighed, as she walked back to the Abbey. 'I shall have no one but Prudence,' she thought regretfully. And then she remembered that her mother had invited Lady Cicely to stay with them until they went up to town. She had forgotten to mention this to Joan.

Joan tried to walk off her restlessness by taking Rascal for a long walk, but she only succeeded in tiring herself. As for Rascal, he burrowed so deeply in a rabbit-hole that his mistress was obliged to drag him out by his hind legs, and his appearance was so disgraceful that he was consigned to the stable by way of punishment.

'One good thing is, there are no rabbit-holes at St. Breda's, and Rascal will have fewer temptations to misbehave,' she observed to Lady Mary as they sat at luncheon. 'Ra will have to behave more rationally if Silence is to regard him with any degree of favour. I fancy from something Heath said in his letter that she is not quite pleased that I insist on bringing him.'

'You know, Joan, that I advised you to leave him under my care.' But the girl shook her head.

'If I go, Ra must go too; I made Heath understand that. We should both be miserable without each other.' And Joan's manner was so decided that Lady Mary said no more.

As soon as the meal was over, Joan went off to a little upstairs sanctum of hers, where she kept her books and treasures, to pack up some of her cherished possessions which she wished to take with her; and she was still busy when the arrival of visitors summoned her to the drawing-room. Some old friends of Lady Mary's had driven over from Michael's End, and as the horses required rest, they remained for nearly two hours, and then there was only time to dress for the Abbey.

A little later, as Joan stood before her glass in her white dress, there was a light tap at her door and Lady Mary entered. As there were no other guests dining at the Abbey, Joan was rather surprised to see that she wore her heliotrope velvet, but it never entered her mind that Lady Mary had selected it because it was the gown the girl liked best. The dark rich tints of the velvet, with its trimming of priceless lace, always gave her a regal appearance, and Joan looked at her with admiring eyes. But before she could speak Lady Mary put a morocco case in her hand.

'I want you to wear this to-night, Joan. It is a little parting gift, a keepsake, which I know you will prize all the more because I wore it when I was younger.'

But as Joan opened the case her eyes were wide with surprise. 'Oh, Lady Mary, you cannot mean me to keep this! Your beautiful diamond and sapphire cross, which Dorothy always admires so! Oh, what will she and Lady Merriton say?' But Lady Mary only smiled at the girl's consternation.

'It was one of my dear Sir Martin's gifts to me,' she said softly. 'He generally gave me jewellery on the anniversary of our wedding-day or on my birthday. I always meant to leave this to you, Joan; but yesterday, as I was turning out my jewel-case with Dunlop, I made up my mind that you should have it now. You need not hesitate to take it, my child. You are not robbing Dorothy. There is plenty for her and Craig's wife when he marries. Besides, Dorothy will have her share of her mother's jewels.'

Joan's eyes sparkled with something like their old brightness as she lifted the little cross from the case. It was attached to a twisted gold necklet of foreign workmanship. Then, as Lady Mary clasped it round the girl's neck, Joan's fresh young lips gave her silent thanks.

'I am so glad you are pleased, dear! It certainly looks very nice.'

'I think I like it best of all your things,' returned Joan. 'But, dear, dearest Lady Mary, I feel as though I do not deserve it. I have been so horrid and disagreeable, and have given you so much trouble.' But her friend only smiled.

'If we were only to be rewarded according to our

deserts, I am afraid some of us would be in a sad plight. There, I hear the carriage, and Dunlop will be waiting with my wrap, and we must not be late.' But as Joan went to the wardrobe in search of her cloak, her eyes were dim with tears. Lady Mary's loving generosity had touched her to the heart.

This little episode had done Joan good, and as she followed Lady Mary into the Abbey drawing-room her expression was far more natural. And as Lady Merriton's greeting was as pleasant and friendly as usual, there was no opening for even her sensitive pride to take offence. The Earl's shake of the hand, too, was as cordial as ever. And though Lady Dorothy at once noticed the sapphire cross, there was nothing but sympathetic appreciation in her tone. Lady Dorothy never coveted her neighbour's possessions, and she was singularly indifferent to personal ornaments. She preferred her friends to give her books and pictures.

'How nice of Aunt Mary to give you that!' she said in quite a pleased voice. 'And it looks so well with your white silk. Mother and I always admired it so. But Aunt Mary has not worn it for years.'

'No, it is too young and girlish for me, Dollie,' observed her aunt, smiling. And then Lady Merriton beckoned Joan to the seat next her, and she too had a pleasant word or two to say about the girl's new acquisition; and this well-bred kindness softened Joan all the more, though inwardly she was still on guard.

Lady Merriton had been a society beauty when the Earl had married her; and though the brilliancy of her youthful bloom had long ago faded with the trials and sorrows of life, and her finely-proportioned figure had become a little too ample of late years, she was

still a very good-looking woman, and her husband admired her as much as ever.

'Few women can compare with my wife and sister in looks,' he said once to an old friend who had been complimenting him on Lady Merriton's appearance in her court dress; and the old friend, who had known them both from childhood, assented to this.

'But Mary Boyle wears the best,' she said to herself. 'Her temperament is calmer, and since her widowhood her life has been a sort of backwater existence. Poor dear Hildegarde has never got over the loss of those boys. That sort of trouble ages a woman.'

Lady Merriton always wore her old gowns in the evening, unless they had guests staying at the Abbey or some of the county people drove over to dinner; and she insisted that Dorothy, who was careless in such matters, should follow her example.

Privately she thought Lady Mary's velvet dress a piece of unwarrantable extravagance; but she would not have hinted at such a thing for the world, except to point a moral to her daughter.

'Why don't you tell her not to dress so grandly, mother?' asked Dorothy. 'Aunt Mary is so good-natured and never minds anything that one says.' But the Countess seemed quite shocked at the idea.

'I should be very sorry to take such a liberty,' she said gravely. 'I daresay your aunt would take my interference in good part, but none the less she would resent it in her quiet way.'

And Lady Merriton was right. In spite of her gentleness, Lady Mary would have regarded any such remark on her sister-in-law's part as uncalled for and not in good form.

To Joan's surprise, the hour spent at the dinner-

table passed as smoothly and pleasantly as usual. There were no awkward subjects broached, and Craig's name was only mentioned once by Dorothy. Joan, who was a little bewildered by a sense of loss and unhappiness, felt as though she must be dreaming some evil dream. These kind people were not treating her as though she were a culprit. But she failed to see the meaning which they so delicately tried to convey to her, or to realise how grateful they were to her for refusing Craig's offer.

Later on she understood more clearly. When they returned to the drawing-room, Lady Merriton left Dorothy to entertain her aunt and invited Joan to occupy the other end of the couch.

'I shall not see much of you after this evening,' she said in quite a motherly tone, 'so we may as well have a little talk now. Lady Mary tells me that she and Dunlop are going up to town with you on Monday morning.'

'Yes, it is so kind of her. But I could have managed quite well with Dunlop.'

'It is a pity that your brother could not have fetched you. You see, Lady Mary and I are a little behind the times. We have an objection to girls travelling alone. Of course you young people laugh at us and say chaperons are going out of fashion. But I am conservative and cling to my own ideas.'

Joan smiled; she was not inclined to enter into an argument on the subject. Lady Merriton was rather an autocrat, and she was apt to resent contradiction. If Dorothy differed in opinion from her mother, she was generally told that at her age girls ought not to be so opinionated. 'I should think my years must have given me some experience and knowledge of the world,'

she would say severely, 'unless you consider your mother a fool!' And this crushing remark certainly spoilt the argument.

But on this occasion Joan declined to tread on the thin ice, and Lady Merriton went on placidly.

'I need not tell you, my dear Joan, that we shall miss you sadly. Dorothy was quite upset at the idea of losing you for so long. I don't know whether to be more sorry for her or for Lady Mary.'

'Lady Mary will miss me most,' returned Joan, putting up her hand to her little cross, and her voice was rather unsteady. 'You see, we are so much together, and the house will seem so lonely.'

'Dorothy and I have been talking about that,' returned Lady Merriton, 'and we have made rather a nice little plan. You know we are going up to town later this year. The fact is'—in a burst of unusual confidence—'we are too much worried about poor Josselyn's condition to be in the mood for gaiety; and as Lady Cicely is coming to us——' Then an uncomfortable flush came to Joan's cheek.

'Dorothy never told me she was coming,' she said in a surprised voice.

'Did she not? Very likely you were talking of other things and it slipped her memory. Cicely's visit fits in rather nicely just now, as her grandmother has just died and they are not going to their town house this season; so she is quite delighted to come to us for a few weeks.'

'I am glad for Dorothy's sake,' replied Joan in a dull voice. But inwardly she was saying to herself:

'How soon—how very soon! But it is the wisdom of the serpent. Craig is so unhappy that a little kindness and sympathy will win his gratitude. And then——

Oh yes, how is he to stand up against them all!' And in spite of her effort a low shuddering sigh escaped Joan's lips. But though Lady Merriton heard it, she said in the same cheerful voice:

'Yes, we have made our plan. Dorothy means to go over to Morningside every afternoon about tea-time and spend at least an hour with Lady Mary. And she must come to us on Tuesdays as well as Thursdays, we shall insist on that. Oh, we shall cheer her amongst us; and, after all, five months will soon pass.'

'Oh yes, I suppose so.' But Joan's tone expressed such despondency and weariness that Lady Merriton felt a little troubled.

'St. Breda's is such an interesting place,' she went on, 'and I hear Canon Leigh's house is quite delightful. It will be a pleasant change for you to share your brother's home life for a little; for, as I sometimes say to Dorothy, Morningside must be rather quiet for a lively girl.'

'Oh no—no, I am never dull there—not for an instant! It is the dearest home a girl could have, and I have been so happy'—here the tears started to Joan's eyes; and as Lady Merriton's large soft hand covered one of hers, the little cold fingers fluttered helplessly in that motherly grasp.

'My dear child, if you knew how we all grieve for the necessity of your going! Oh, the mischief caused by that foolish, reckless boy of mine! Joan, let me say this before you go. My husband and I think you have behaved so well. So far from disappointing us or betraying our trust, your conduct has been quite admirable. You have entered into our feelings with a delicacy and sense of propriety quite surprising at your age.' But

Joan tore her hand away and started up from the couch; she could bear no more.

'Don't, please, Lady Merriton! If you knew all, you would not praise me. I have not been as good as you think, or I should not be so unhappy. But I wish to do right, and I think you may trust me.' But at this crucial moment the door was flung open in rather an impetuous manner and Craig walked into the room.

CHAPTER XIII

CRAIG HAS HIS INNINGS

The courage by which love, like honour, starts to the post of noble danger and maintains it, till by such fidelity it becomes a place of danger no more . . .—ROBERTSON.

I have no show of wealth, my wealth is you.—Sir PHILIP SIDNEY.

IT would have been evident to the most casual onlooker that Craig's abrupt entrance into the room was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. The Earl's good-natured face clouded over in a moment. Lady Dorothy uttered a shocked little exclamation, and Lady Merriton assumed her most dignified and severe aspect.

'What does this mean, Craig?' she asked coldly, as her son stooped to kiss her cheek. But Craig, who quite understood that he had been sent to Coventry and was expected to remain at a respectful distance, took no notice of his chilling reception.

'I have been dining at the Rectory, mother,' he returned quietly, 'and as something has gone wrong with the motor, I came in search of a spare bicycle. How are you, Aunt Mary? I had an idea you and Joan were dining here to-night, and I hoped I should be in time to see you before you left.' Craig was looking at Joan as he spoke; but the girl, who was still

standing by the couch, had turned her flushed face aside and he could not see her expression.

'It is getting late, Craig; I think we must be going now,' observed Lady Mary, who was somewhat alarmed at the ominous frown on her brother's brow. 'Shall we ring and tell them to send the carriage round, George?' But before Lord Merriton could answer, Craig negatived this in his masterful way.

'Why are you in such a hurry this evening, Aunt Mary? Collins will be round at his usual time; it is only a quarter to ten.' And Lady Mary, with rather a disconcerted air, tried to look pleased at this information.

'I thought it was much later,' she murmured in Dorothy's ear. 'But I suppose it is no use hurrying Collins, he always will take his time.'

Meanwhile Craig, who seemed in a somewhat aggressive mood, walked straight up to Joan.

'What is this that Miss Rutherford tells me?' he asked abruptly—'that you are going away, and for months?' and his tone compelled Joan to look at him.

'My brother has invited me to pay a long visit to St. Breda's Lodge,' she stammered. 'It has all been settled so hurriedly; Heath's letter only came on Monday.' But Joan's explanation did not seem to satisfy Craig.

'But you spent Christmas with your brother. Is it not rather soon to be paying him another visit? And how is it possible for you to leave Aunt Mary for months? There is something underneath all this, or why have I been left so much in the dark?' and Craig's tone of hurt resentment frightened Joan.

'It was all so hastily settled,' she faltered; 'it was only arranged on Monday, and as I was going over to the Rectory, I told Prudence. It is all quite simple,

Craig'—but Joan paled visibly under the angry blue fire of Craig's eyes. 'Heath wishes me to pay them a nice long visit. And as Lady Mary is willing to part with me——' But before Joan could finish her sentence Lady Mary came to the girl's side.

'Why are you catechising Joan in this peremptory fashion, Craig?' she asked mildly. 'What she says is perfectly true. Her brother wishes her to pay him a long visit, and I am quite ready to spare her.'

'You are always ready to do your duty, are you not, Aunt Mary?' but Craig's tone was hardly conciliatory. 'Then I will not tease you with any more questions, Joan; I see it all quite clearly now. A nice little family scheme has been hatched. Yes, father,' as the Earl rose heavily from his chair, 'I will talk to you presently, but before Aunt Mary goes I will have my say for once. Do you think I am a child to be blindfolded in this fashion? Joan, I know why you are going away. You and poor Aunt Mary are both to be sacrificed. You will not be allowed to return to Morningside until the real scrapegrace is safe in India. Do you think I do not understand all that?' And then he took her hand. 'It is good-bye now, dear, but I shall see you again soon'—and the pressure of his hand on hers comforted Joan not a little. At least he was not angry with her—all his indignation was reserved for those who had formulated the little scheme, and were sending Joan away in the hope that time and absence would cure his infatuation.

'I think we had better wish you good-night, Hildegarde,' observed poor Lady Mary. Then the Countess rose in her most stately manner.

'I am very sorry our pleasant evening should be spoilt by Craig's singular behaviour, but I hope you will

excuse it. Joan, my dear, I will see you after church on Sunday, so this is not good-bye. Dorothy, love, will you go with your aunt?' Thus did Lady Merriton clear the deck for action; but Craig took no notice as he walked across the room to open the door.

As Joan passed him he whispered in her ear, 'I am so sorry, darling, it is all my fault.' And if her life had depended upon it Joan could not have refrained from giving him that smile. It was so sweet and sad that it stirred the young man's pulses with renewed hope. Was it possible, after all, that she cared for him? And as he turned back into the room he registered an inward vow that he would not leave England until he had found out the truth.

'And now, sir, what does this strange behaviour on your part mean?' and the Earl confronted his son with a lowering brow. He was an easy-tempered man, but he could be roused to fierceness or sullenness when he was tried too severely. 'You know what your mother and I feel on the subject of your conduct to Joan Leigh, and yet before our faces you could make love to her!'

'Oh no, Merriton, Craig could hardly be accused of that'—for the Countess, who was not without tact, felt this was going too far—'he was only bidding Joan good-bye.' But Lord Merriton could be obstinate as well as aggressive when he chose.

'He was holding her hand for quite a long time, and he told her, in defiance of our known wishes, that he would see her again, and when he opened the door he was whispering in her ear. We used to call that sort of thing making love in my time, my lady.' Then the glimmer of an amused smile crossed Craig's face. 'Really at times the governor was too funny!'

'I do not deny that I said so, sir,' he returned quietly, 'and if I live I shall certainly keep my word. Canon Leigh is a gentleman—I suppose he will not turn me out of his house. And if he does, there are other ways and means. Thank heaven, we don't live in the dark ages, when parents were jailers and recreant daughters were consigned to nunneries!' And Craig laughed in rather a scoffing fashion.

'My dear boy, that is hardly the way to talk to your father, especially as you can see how vexed and worried he is.'

'There is no particular reason for my father to be either vexed or worried,' returned Craig in a loud, fierce voice. 'I am committing no crime in wanting to marry Joan. If I had fallen in love with a music-hall singer or a ballet dancer there might be some reason for my father's anger. But Joan Leigh is a gentlewoman, and her brother is in a good position, and even if her pedigree is nothing particular, I should not be the first Bastow who has not married in his own rank. Joan's want of money is the difficulty—oh yes, I grant you that. But she is Aunt Mary's adopted daughter, and——' But here the Earl angrily interposed.

'Your Aunt Mary has very little money to leave. I have seen Sir Martin's will. The greater part will go to Sir Rodney Boyle, and was only for her use during her life. I have also been led to believe that some of this will come to Dorothy, and only a comparatively small sum will be left to Joan.'

'I don't see that that matters, father'—and now Craig spoke more civilly—'we shall have to wait rather a long time, that is all. I am not afraid of being poor,' continued the young man, 'I am only afraid of losing the girl I love. Now, mother, I must not stay any

longer, as my time is up. I must go round to the bicycle-house and make tracks for Aldershot.'

'We shall see you next week, Craig?' asked his mother anxiously. But he would not be induced to name any special evening. He might look in for an hour or two one of these days, unless he were too busy; and Lady Merriton was obliged to be content with this vague assurance.

'You were a little too heavy-handed, Merriton,' observed his wife, as soon as they were left alone. 'Boys of Craig's age are apt to be touchy and to mount the high horse. He is behaving in a most ridiculous fashion; but if we quarrel with him we shall only make things worse, and he won't keep near us.'

'Then let him keep away,' returned the Earl testily. But his wife looked at him reproachfully.

'Oh, Merriton, how can you say such a thing, when you know Cicely will be here and we want him to come as often as possible!'

'And what good will that do when the lad is in this humour?' replied her husband. 'He will as likely as not affront the girl with his sulkiness and inattention, just to pay us out for sending his sweetheart away.' But Lady Merriton refused to admit this.

'Craig is a gentleman,' she said calmly; 'he will not treat our guest so discourteously. Besides, he and Cicely are very good friends, and they always get on so well together. You must not be too anxious, my dear, and spoil my nice little plan. Young people will have their fling—they kick up their heels like young colts at grass, and run away from their own shadows—but we must bide our time. Joan, poor child, will be safely out of the way, and when Craig

comes you may depend upon it that he will be quite pleased to see his old friend. And as for Cicely, it is my belief that she is more than half in love with Craig now, though only Dorothy and I have found it out.' And then, as her husband seemed somewhat impressed by this view of the case, Lady Merriton announced her intention of retiring, as the hour was late.

Merriton would recover his good temper over his pipe, she thought. My Lady Nicotine is an unfailing peacemaker. His heart would soften to Craig, and he would think more leniently of his obstinacy and wrong-headedness. 'After all, there is some excuse for the poor boy,' she said to herself. 'Joan is certainly a very taking little person; I could not help admiring her myself to-night. But there, Cicely will soon make him forget her!'

There was no word exchanged between Lady Mary and Joan until they entered Morningside, when Lady Mary made her usual Thursday night speech.

'We won't keep Dunlop out of her bed while we talk. As soon as she has brushed my hair I will come to your room and bid you good-night.' This was a slight deviation from the ordinary routine, as Joan generally went to Lady Mary's room. But she made no remark on this, she was far too preoccupied to notice trifles; but all the same she would have preferred dispensing with the usual talk altogether.

When Lady Mary came about twenty minutes later, she expressed some surprise at seeing Joan still in her evening dress.

'Do you know it has just struck eleven?' she said in a tone of mild rebuke.

'Has it?' returned Joan indifferently. 'But it does not matter, for I am not a bit sleepy. I have been

having a tremendous think, as Wanda used to say.' But Lady Mary only shook her head rather sadly.

'Dunlop wanted to talk, but I was obliged to tell her I was too tired. I hope it was the truth,' she continued anxiously; for she was very scrupulous, and always took herself to task if her conscience told her that she had in any way exaggerated the truth. 'Craig, foolish fellow, has given us enough to think about. How unfortunate that he should have dined at the Rectory to-night; for of course Prudence would naturally suppose that he was aware of your going away.'

'I do not know why Prudence should take that for granted.'

'Very likely the Rector or Mr. Trafford may have mentioned it first, and Craig would probably turn to her for an explanation. But I think it was a pity he should come straight to the Abbey, as he certainly expected to find us there, and make such an uncomfortable scene. I don't think he ought to have put you in such a painful position.'

'It was certainly very awkward,' observed Joan. 'But I don't see that Craig was to blame. I think the Earl and Lady Merriton were very hard on him.'

'They thought he had no right to come, Joan, when his mother had begged him to remain away for a few days. There was nothing to be gained by making his father angry.'

'I think it was for Craig to be angry,' returned Joan in her clear young voice. 'They are treating him like a child, as he said—keeping him in the dark and making uncomfortable plots and mysteries. People can be too clever and overreach themselves,' continued the girl. 'How much wiser it would have been for his mother to tell Craig the simple truth—that they

thought it would be better for me to go to St. Breda's for the present! He would have been just as sorry, of course, but he would not have been so hurt and angry.'

'I see what you mean, dear.'

'Craig is very straightforward and he hates little crooked paths, and you have no idea how proud he is, and they are taking him just the wrong way. I thought,' went on Joan indignantly, 'that Lady Merriton would know better, but she is making mistakes too. Did they tell you that Lady Cicely is coming to the Abbey for a long visit?'

'Yes, they told me on Monday. I think I was rather sorry to hear it, though, of course, she will be a nice companion for Dorothy.'

'Lady Merriton was not thinking of Dorothy,' returned Joan, with a scornful laugh. 'But she is making a grievous mistake. It is far too soon to weave these pretty little plots. Craig is so clear-sighted, he will read between the lines at once, and his visits to the Abbey will be few and far between, and poor dear Lady Cicely's feelings will be hurt.' And Lady Mary sighed, for she knew Joan was speaking the truth. She was by no means certain that Lady Merriton was pursuing a wise policy.

'You are sorry that they have invited Cicely?' she said very gently. But Joan would not allow this.

'I am only sorry that the invitation has been given so soon,' she returned rather proudly. 'I think if they had waited a little they would have had more chance of success. Do not misunderstand me, dear, or think for a moment that I would ever consent to stand in Craig's way. If he can bring himself to love Lady Cicely, I am quite sure that it would be far better for him to marry her, and I should be the first to tell him so.'

'You are a dear, generous child, Joan, and I believe you,' returned Lady Mary, taking the girl's hand as she spoke. 'But the marrying and giving in marriage of those we love are not in our weak hands, and I think we may thank God for that, for some of us would-be wise folk would make a rare muddle of things.' And then a sweet, serious smile came to Lady Mary's lips. 'Don't you remember those lines that struck us both so much? They begin:

He holds the key of all unknown,
And I am glad;
If other hands should hold the key,
Or if He trusted it to me,
I might be sad.

What if to-morrow's cares were here
Without its rest?
I'd rather He'd unlocked the day,
And as its hours swung open say,
"My will is best."'

'Oh yes, that is so beautiful!'

'Then we will just think of it to-night, you and I, and not trouble ourselves about other people's mistakes. There, good-night, my child, and God bless you!'

When Lady Mary left the room, Joan was in no haste to seek her couch—she had not quite finished her thinking. As she brushed out the masses of her glorious hair, her mind dwelt on that strange scene in the Abbey drawing-room, and once she laughed aloud, but the tears were in her eyes.

'Oh, you darling,' she said softly, 'how I love you!' But she was not speaking of her dear Lady Mary.

CHAPTER XIV

'AUF WIEDERSEHEN!'

Surely it is not true blessedness to be free from sorrow, while there is sorrow and sin in the world; sorrow is then a part of love, and love does not seek to throw it off.—GEORGE ELIOT.

> And when the melancholy fit shall fall
> Sudden from Heaven like a creeping cloud,
> Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
> Or on the rainbow of the salt sand wave,
> Or on the wealth of globed peonies.
>
> KEATS.

BOTH Lady Mary and Joan had secretly hoped that their friends would have left them in peace during those last three days. But nothing seemed further from their intention. From morning to evening they were never alone.

Lady Dorothy perfectly haunted the house. She came in the morning to help Joan with her packing, and there was generally some urgent reason why she should look in at tea-time. And she was so sweetly affectionate to Joan, and so anxious to do all in her power to soften the pain of parting, that no one could have the heart to hint that she was wasting valuable time. Then on Saturday afternoon Prudence called, and brought her brother and Mr. Trafford with her;

and as Lady Dorothy was there also, there was quite a cheerful tea-party. And they stayed so long that Lady Dorothy had to hurry off for fear she should be late for dinner. But to Joan's chagrin she turned up again in the evening with a message from her mother. Lady Merriton had one of her tiresome sore throats and would not be able to go to church the next day; and she begged, as a special favour, that Lady Mary and Joan would come up to luncheon, and then she could bid Joan good-bye.

'Oh dear!' sighed Joan. But Lady Mary gave her a warning glance. The invitation was as unwelcome to her as it was to Joan, but it would never do to refuse it.

'Your mother is very kind, Dorothy, and I am so sorry she has caught cold. As she wishes it so much, we will drive straight from Herondale. But we shall not be able to stay to tea.'

'But why not, Aunt Mary? Joan has finished her packing, and there is nothing else to do.'

'I should prefer to come home early in the afternoon,' returned Lady Mary quietly.

'Then I will come back with you,' returned Lady Dorothy impulsively; 'for I want to see as much of Joan as I possibly can.'

'I think I must ask you not to do that, Dollie,' returned her aunt, with a smile. 'Perhaps I am selfish, but I want Joan all to myself the last evening.'

Then Lady Dorothy coloured slightly and said no more. She was very amiable and loving, but she was a little dense at times, and her want of perception sometimes tried Joan.

'I was so glad you said that to Dorothy,' she observed later. 'The dear thing really gives us too

much of her company just now. I don't think it is quite kind of Lady Merriton to ask us to luncheon to-morrow, when she knows you like to stay quietly at home on Sundays.'

'But she means to be kind, dear. She wants to make up for that contretemps on Thursday. She is only paying you a little attention.' But Joan smiled rather ruefully. What was the good of escaping Scylla if there were still a danger of Charybdis! But Lady Mary, who quite understood the girl's feelings, went on in a soothing manner:

'We will not stay long. I will promise you that, love. We will have one of our nice quiet Sunday evenings. You will not mind giving up church for once?' Then Joan protested quite vehemently that she never intended to go that last evening.

'I thought not. You shall sing some of my favourite hymns, and we will have a nice talk. I mean to tell Willis not to admit any one.' And then Joan was pacified.

Joan tried hard to be bright the next day, for Lady Mary's sake, but her heart was as heavy as lead. And though she did her best to enter into the beautiful service, and to listen to the Rector's helpful sermon, her thoughts would wander to forbidden subjects, and she would ask herself how long it would be before she occupied her old seat in Herondale Church.

'If I could be sure that I shall only be exiled for five months,' she thought; 'but how is one to be certain of anything under such circumstances?'

Prudence had bidden her good-bye the previous day, but she hurried after them for a final hand-shake in the porch.

'We shall have you back before long,' she said, with a kind smile. 'And Dorothy and I mean to write and tell you all the parish news. Mr. Trafford is going to take your class this afternoon; I expect his stories will amuse the children.' And these few cheerful words brightened Joan's pale face.

Mr. Trafford put them into the carriage.

'I expect we shall meet before long, Miss Leigh,' he observed. 'I shall have to pay my respects to my new uncle, and judge for myself the effects of a late matrimonial alliance on my maiden aunt. I believe Kenwyn is not far from St. Breda's Lodge?'

'Oh no, it is just across the green. I expect my sister-in-law will soon make Mrs. Ramsay's acquaintance; of course every one in the Precincts knows each other.' And Mr. Trafford professed himself delighted to hear this.

Luncheon at the Abbey was rather a dull meal that day. The Earl was not in good spirits, and Lady Merriton was so unwell that she offered no objection when Lady Mary rose to take leave.

'You are only fit to be in your room, Hildegarde,' she said sympathetically, 'and talking is only making you hoarse.' And the Countess was obliged to own that she was right.

'I must not kiss you, Joan,' she said, holding the girl's hand affectionately, 'I always think sore throats are infectious; but I hope you will have a pleasant visit, my dear.'

'I suppose I may run across after breakfast for five minutes to wish you good-bye.' And Lady Dorothy's voice was rather reproachful.

'Of course you may, Dorcas dear; we shall not leave until after ten'; and then Dorothy seemed content.

That last evening was a strangely peaceful memory to Joan during the next few months. There were no troublesome intruders to disturb them. Joan sang all Lady Mary's favourite hymns, and played her best loved selections from Handel and Bach and Mendelssohn. And then, as the soft spring twilight stole over the garden, she joined Lady Mary in the window recess, where she often sat to watch the sunset. It had faded now, and only a faint pink streak, like a fading scarf, lay across the great breadths of evening sky.

Lady Mary did not speak as she made room for the girl, but when a shy little hand stole into hers she held it fast. It was Joan who broke the silence.

'Next Sunday,' she said softly, 'you will be sitting here alone.'

Lady Mary sighed. 'Oh, I knew we should be both thinking of that! I shall be missing my child sadly, but I comfort myself by remembering that she will not be far away. Joan dear, if you should need me, or be in any difficulty, you have only to tell me so and I will come to you at once.'

'How sweet of you to say that!' and Joan nestled against her so closely that her ruddy locks brushed Lady Mary's shoulder. 'Do you know what is troubling me this evening? It is the fear that you might be ill and wanting me, and that they would not allow you to send for me.'

'My dear, what could have put such an absurd idea into your head! If I were ill and really wanted you, I should certainly send for you without asking any one's permission. Why,' as a low sob reached her ear, 'my darling, you must not give way to these morbid fancies. Surely you can trust me?'

'Entirely, implicitly—you have never disappointed

me yet,' exclaimed the girl passionately. 'It is only other people's influence that I am fearing.'

'No one will ever come between us, Joan. If you were my own child I think I could not love you better.'

'And yet you can send me away from you?' murmured the girl. 'No, forgive me, dearest, I ought not to have said that. I know that it is right for me to go.'

'I am glad that you can say that. And though we are both rather sad at heart this evening, I do not for one moment regret the step we have taken. I would far rather part with you for a time, and feel that you were on the path of duty, than keep you with me for my own pleasure. We are both trying to save our dear boy from making a great mistake, and to restore peace to a troubled household, and even if we fail we shall have done our best.'

'Oh yes, I hope so.' But for the moment Joan was unable to say any more. A sudden thought had flashed through her mind, almost turning her giddy. Was Lady Mary right, after all? Were any of them right? What if the sacrifice were unnecessary, and they were all making a grievous mistake? What if, after all, it would not be the best and wisest thing for Craig to marry the girl he loved?

Joan clenched her disengaged hand as this doubt assailed her.

'Lady Mary is a good woman,' she said to herself, 'but good people make sad mistakes sometimes. I am sure she did in her own case, when she gave up Maurice Annersley. How is she sure that Lady Cicely will be the right wife for Craig—that she will make him happy? What right have we short-sighted human creatures to try and make or mar our neighbour's life—to remove

his landmarks or take from him his dearest possession under pretence of giving him something better? Money is not everything, it cannot buy happiness or peace of mind or any of Heaven's best gifts,' went on the girl despondently.

But at this moment Lady Mary's soft tones arrested her attention. By some singular transmission of thought she seemed to have guessed Joan's perplexity, for she was repeating to herself softly the lines she had quoted on Thursday night:

> 'He holds the key of all unknown,
> And I am glad;
> If other hands should hold the key,
> Or if He trusted it to me,
> I might be sad.'

And then Joan resolutely threw off the tormenting doubt which threatened her peace.

After this they talked quietly of many things—little everyday arrangements such as women love to discuss.

'I do not wish you to write to me oftener than you like, Joan,' observed Lady Mary presently. 'Much as I shall love your letters, I do not want them to be a burden. And I will not expect them on any special day—I always think that is such a mistake.'

'Then in that case our letters will cross sometimes, and I shall have to write off by the next post to answer your questions. Not that I shall mind that,' continued Joan hastily, 'for writing to you will be one of my chief pleasures, and I shall not grudge either time or trouble.' Then Lady Mary looked pleased.

There was something that Joan wanted to say,

though she hardly knew how to clothe her meaning in words. But Lady Mary, who was very clear-sighted, read the girl's troubled expression correctly.

'There is something you want to ask me, Joan? Don't be afraid to tell me if there is anything I can do to make you happier.' But Joan shook her head.

'No, I was not thinking of myself. I was only going to ask you to be perfectly frank with me in your letters, and not to hide things for fear of giving me pain.'

'Oh, I understand now! You mean that I am to let you know how matters progress between Craig and Lady Cicely?'

'Yes, I mean that,' and Joan's voice was quite steady. 'It would be far better for me to be prepared than to be told suddenly that they were engaged. There is no one else whom I can ask to do this.'

After a moment's consideration, Lady Mary promised that nothing of importance should be kept back. 'But I shall expect equal confidence on your side,' she finished.

Then Joan, who was much relieved on gaining her point, assured her that her letters should be faithful records of her doings and feelings. 'I shall tell you how I get on with Silence, and when I am naughty to her.' But as a grave look came to Lady Mary's face at this—'I really do mean to be as good as possible.'

'And you won't laugh at her for being a little fussy over Heath and the children?'

'No, I will only call her an early Victorian wife; she will consider that a compliment. Silence is very enthusiastic about our Queen of blessed memory; she thinks that there never has been, and never will be, any queen to compare with her.'

'I think many of us will agree with her in that.'

'Oh, but she carries her hero-worship to such an extent! Do you know, there is a large framed picture of the old Queen in every room in the house, even in the children's bedrooms. And in the dining-room there are two: the youthful Victoria Regina in her coronation robes, with her girlish face and plaited hair; and the aged widow Queen, at the date of her Diamond Jubilee.'

'I like Silence all the better for her true-hearted loyalty.'

'Yes,' returned Joan with a touch of her old mischief, 'and it is a comfort to feel that there is one subject on which we really do agree!' Then Lady Mary laughed and patted her cheek.

'You must be careful, Joan. A little tact and forbearance are the sweeteners of daily life. Never forget for one moment that Silence is the mistress of the house and your brother's wife, and that, however you may wonder at the fact, he dearly loves and honours her.' Lady Mary's quiet tone conveyed such occult meaning to Joan's ear that the girl flushed uneasily. 'Conscience, which makes cowards of us all,' most certainly did not exonerate her. And then, as the gong announced the evening meal, there was no further allusion to St. Breda's Lodge.

Two hours later, when Joan entered her room, she was surprised to find a tiny bouquet lying beside her brushes on the toilet-table.

A beautiful crimson rose which she knew had come from the conservatory at the Abbey was surrounded by sprays of forget-me-not which she also knew had grown in a sheltered corner of the kitchen garden. 'How sweet of Dorcas to think of that!' she said to

herself. And then she saw there was a word or two written on the slip of paper round the flowers—'Auf Wiedersehen!' and her heart beat a little faster, for she knew the handwriting was not Dorothy's. Craig had sent them, but how and in what way had he contrived that that floral message should reach her? And this question puzzled Joan for a long time. But if she had only known, it was perfectly simple.

Craig had walked over to Herondale for the evening service. Lady Dorothy was also there. The Ogilvies had offered her a seat in their waggonette. As there was a spare seat, Craig proposed driving back with them to the Abbey, as he was anxious to know how his mother was. And the farewell message was a sudden inspiration which came to him; the only difficulty was to find a messenger. But fortune often favours the brave; at the gate of Morningside he came upon Anne, the under housemaid, who had been trained to service under the Abbey housekeeper, and he asked her in a cool, matter-of-fact voice to place them in Miss Leigh's room. Anne, with all a young girl's love of mystery and love-making, readily promised to do so; and the next moment she hid the flowers under her jacket, as Willis overtook her.

'What was the Captain saying to you, Anne?' he asked suspiciously. But Anne tossed her head in rather a pert manner.

'Law, Mr. Willis, there is no call for you to be so inquisitive. The Captain was only sending his respects to the ladies. But there, I must hurry on as I am a bit late.' And then she quickly accomplished her errand.

Joan's hand trembled a little as she held the flowers, and by and by a great bright tear rolled down her

cheek and fell into the very heart of the crimson rose, where it lay like a dewdrop.

'Darling—darling, and I must not even thank you!' she whispered. But Craig never guessed how that silent message comforted her; and neither then nor afterwards did Joan mention the little episode to Lady Mary.

CHAPTER XV

'WHO IS SHE, LITTLE BEAR?'

I held it more human, more heav'nly, first
By winning words to conquer willing hearts,
And make persuasion do the work of fear.

MILTON.

Gently I took that which ungently came,
And without scorn forgave. Do thou the same.
A wrong done to thee, think a cat's eye spark,
Thou would'st not see, were not thine own heart dark.

S. T. COLERIDGE.

EASTER was unusually early that year, and as the train slackened at St. Breda's station Joan was not surprised to see her brother on the platform with all his five children round him, and for the moment the pleasant sight banished the girl's sadness. 'Oh, how nice of you all to come and meet me!' she exclaimed, and Canon Leigh smiled as he helped her out.

'They insisted on coming, and I thought you would not object.' And then Joan kissed them all round, not excepting her eldest nephew—a proceeding which seemed to embarrass Vere, who, being thirteen and a Winchester boy, was inclined to stand on his dignity. Even Joan's innocently surprised remark, 'Why, how tall you have grown, Vere!' failed to atone for that indiscretion.

'A fellow hates to be kissed in a public place,' he

confided afterwards to Frank. 'You saw yourself that father only shook hands with her.'

But Frank, who had not yet attained to the glories of a public school, grinned dubiously. He was devoted to Vere, and during the holidays he followed him about like his shadow; but he was a warm-hearted boy, and much attached to his young aunt. 'Well, I don't know,' he returned slowly. 'You see, I am not so grown-up as you, Vere, and I don't a bit mind Aunt Joan kissing me —any more than Noel does.'

'Oh, Noel's a baby—and you are not much better yourself!' he was going to add. But Frank's face was so red and his brown eyes so appealing that Vere forgot his hurt dignity.

'Oh, never mind, little 'un, we can't all have the same tastes! Now, if you like to race me to the next lamp-post for two big bull's-eyes?' And Frank was alert at once.

'And me too, Vere,' almost screamed Noel, a solemn-faced, delicate little fellow of seven years old—'me too, Vere!'

'Shut up, Noel,' remarked his elder brother severely. 'Little boys of your age should be seen, not heard. Come on, Frankie, you may take the usual start—only play fair—one, two, three, and away.' But though Frank ran as though a bull were after him, Vere was first at the winning-post.

'That's not so bad,' he said encouragingly. 'But you can't expect to beat me for the next year or two. Look here, you and Noel can have the bull's-eyes. I don't want to spoil my tea, for I know there is going to be strawberry jam and no end of cakes in Aunt Joan's honour.' And then the three brothers walked on amicably.

Meanwhile, Canon Leigh had managed to pack Joan, his two girls, himself, and Rascal into the roomy fly, leaving the heaviest part of the luggage for the carrier's cart.

Canon Leigh had become rather a dignified personality of late years. In his younger days he had been somewhat thin, but he had filled out and was now quite portly. He was a good-looking man, with a strong face and fine dark eyes, and his wife thought that no dignitary of the Church could compare with him. And though Joan did not exactly share Silence's adoration, she felt a natural admiration for her brother.

'I want him to be a dean,' she said once to Lady Mary; 'he would look quite lovely in gaiters.' But Lady Mary only smiled at this frivolous remark, though it was her private opinion that Heath Leigh would one day have a bishopric offered him.

'He was born under a lucky star,' she observed once, 'and he has that infinite capacity for taking pains which they call genius. Was it not Carlyle who said something of the kind? It is my belief that, if he had been a politician instead of taking holy orders, he would have ended his days as prime minister.' And Lady Mary really meant what she said.

Wanda, who was a year younger than Vere, was rather like her father in outward appearance, though she had her mother's reticent nature. She had a handsome little face and dark hair, which she wore in a wide plait to her waist. Jessica—*alias* Bill—was not such a good-looking child, but in spite of her freckles and snub nose she was rather an interesting little person. She had curly fair hair, and mischievous blue eyes, which could be very irresistible at times. Bill, as they called her, was her brothers' torment and delight.

She played monkeyish tricks which goaded them to fury, but when she was on her good behaviour and things went smoothly, Bill could be angelic enough.

No one but her father could really control her. With him she was always docile and amenable; but Silence, though a devoted mother, sometimes failed to understand her.

Some months previously, Heath Leigh had found his wife in tears. Jessica had been very naughty over her lessons, and she could do nothing with her. She had been so pert and rude that she had been obliged to send her to her room.

'I am afraid I shall not be able to teach her any longer,' she continued sadly. 'I endeavour to do my best and be patient with her, but she tries me so terribly. I am afraid Jessica does not love me, as all the other children do.'

'Nonsense, dear; Jess is a very affectionate little person. But she is at a troublesome age, and being so much with the boys has made her rough and hoydenish. She will come all right in time.'

'But Wanda was with the boys too, and she has never been the least rough or unmanageable.'

'No, indeed, Wanda has a different temperament—at least you have one prettily-behaved daughter!' And then Heath smiled at his wife and went off to interview the culprit.

He found Jess at the open window whistling to an enraptured robin; but she broke off directly she saw her father and knit her brows together pettishly.

'Of course she's told you, Dad!' Then Heath laid his white massive hand on the rough mane. 'Who is she, little bear?' Then Jess grew suddenly red.

'Oh, you know who I mean, Daddy. Of course mother has gone and told you I was naughty!'

'And all the time you were really good? Dear me, what an ill-used little bear! I must set this right with your mother at once.' But as Canon Leigh moved to the door, Jess followed him and begged him not to go.

'But I can't have you punished for nothing, Jess! it is quite against my principles.' Then a hot little hand clutched his sleeve.

'It wasn't for nothing, Dad. I was naughty to mother really'; and here a twist of the firm little mouth showed that Jess was on the verge of tears; and a fatherly arm drew her closer.

'Tell Dad all about it, darling; we shall neither of us be happy until you do.' Then, with hidden face and sobbing breath, Jess made her confession. She had learnt her lessons badly, and when her mother had told her that she must learn them again, she had snatched the book out of her hand and said rude things.

'What sort of things?' Dad wondered mildly. And Jess fidgeted in rather an embarrassed manner.

'Oh, she could not quite remember. But she was quite sure she had been rude. She had stamped with her foot on the ground, and muttered out loud that she wanted to go to school and learn with other girls, and that she did not like lessons with mother. Mother's teaching always made her feel sleepy'—and so on, quite a long list of transgressions for one morning. But perhaps it was as well that Jess did not see the amused twinkle in her father's eyes. Jess as a penitent was so droll! Her searching of conscience was so thorough—no holes or corners left unvisited. But by the time Jess had finished, Heath quite understood why Silence's calm patience had broken down.

'There, dad, I can't truthfully remember any more.'

'I am rather glad to hear that,' returned her long-suffering parent cheerfully. 'Now, Jess, you know what you have to do next.' Then Jess wriggled and squirmed like a worm on a hook.

What was the use of Dad being so kind and understanding if he would not let her off this unpleasant duty? He would not kiss her or tell her that he forgave her until she had asked her mother's pardon. 'You know what you have to do next,' was all he said, but there had been a quiet finality about the words that afforded Jess no loophole of escape.

Now Jess, who could sin so freely with her sharp tongue, was a proud little soul and hated to apologise. But in her small world father was the supreme ruler, and if he ordered her to walk up to a cannon's mouth Jess would have to do it. So she set her teeth hard until they fairly ground together, and marched out of the room with her chin in the air.

Silence was still sitting by the open window. Her head ached and her eyes looked heavy and a little sad, but she held out a kind hand to the culprit.

'You are come to tell me you are sorry, dear?' But Jess frowned and almost stamped her foot again with irritation. Why was her mother forgiving her in this silly way before she had said her apology? Jess rattled it off quite feverishly in her hurry to obey father.

'I was very rude and naughty, and I am sorry, mother, and hope you will forgive me.' Then Silence put her arms round the stubborn little figure.

'Jess darling, mother forgives you, and always will; but she is very unhappy because her little girl does not love her.'

Jess's blue eyes opened in quite a startled way.

That fond, mournful tone penetrated the wilful little heart. The next moment she was on her mother's lap and her thin little arms were round Silence's neck.

'Oh, mother, I do love you! How can you say that because I like being rude sometimes!'

'Do you like hurting me, Jess? I told your father that I could not go on teaching you—that you give me too much trouble.'

'But I never will again—never, never!' and Jess kissed her mother's cheek remorsefully. 'I will have my lessons perfect to-morrow—you will see if I don't!' And Jess kept her word.

Silence had very little trouble with her after that. Now and then Jess lost her temper and forgot her manners, but she soon got rid of 'Mr. Devil,' as she used to say in her childish days. 'Mr. Devil has gone and I am good now, nurse,' she would observe in the most matter-of-fact way, which rather appalled that worthy woman.

Jess sat opposite her aunt, looking at her with adoring eyes. 'I am so glad you have come for a long, long time, Aunt Joan,' she said. 'I lay awake thinking about it last night till quite late, it made me so happy. And Wanda is glad too, though she does not talk about it.'

Joan smiled lovingly at her nieces. She was very fond of them—they were such dear children—but the parting with Lady Mary still depressed her. And Heath, who instinctively guessed her feelings, called off Jess's attentions by pointing out one of her special playfellows who was coming out of the stationer's as they drove past.

Even Joan, in spite of her preoccupation, looked about her with a sense of quickened interest.

It was a lovely spring afternoon. The little square, with its monument and quaint picturesque streets, was quite crowded with motors, gigs, and light carts—all the St. Breda's folks were out shopping, gossiping, drinking tea; dogs were barking, hooters sounding, every now and then a motor dashed up the narrow, steep little straggling street, with its old houses and overhanging windows. The next moment they passed through the beautiful old gateway into the Precincts, and the glorious Cathedral, with its massive grey towers and graceful pinnacles, rose before Joan's admiring eyes —solemn, calm, majestic in the sunshine. It was like a wonderful dream, thought the girl. And all around it was a peaceful environment—quiet old houses and rows of shady trees, and a little green where some boys were playing. Farther on were the ruins of an ancient infirmary—fragments of massive walls and picturesque arches, through which the passer-by had a glimpse of St. Breda's Lodge. In the delicate tracery of one some tiny bird was pecking at the yellow stone, the martins were flying in and out of their nests, and from a garden near a thrush was fluting melodiously to his mate.

'I forgot how beautiful it was,' murmured Joan in an awe-struck voice.

'You only saw it in winter,' returned her brother, 'and I remember the weather was dark and gloomy. But you have no idea how the beauty of it all grows on one,' and Heath's fine strong face was lighted up as he spoke. 'If one could only live up to it, Joan—if one only deserved this goodly heritage!' And Joan, who was always quick to respond to any emotion, gave his arm a loving little squeeze. At that moment she realised how proud she was of him.

'There's mother!' exclaimed Jessica delightedly, as they drove in. And then in a loud aside to her sister, 'Look, Wanda, doesn't she look nice; she has put on her newest best dress in Aunt Joan's honour!'

'Hush, Bill, how can you be so silly—Aunt Joan will hear!' But Jess took no notice of this repressive speech.

As the fly stopped, Silence stood quietly in the doorway, with the afternoon sunshine streaming on her fair Madonna face and smooth brown hair.

'You have not been looking out for us long, Silence,' observed Joan, 'the train was quite punctual for once.' But even as she said this she was wondering why Silence's greeting was so much more affectionate than usual.

'Oh no, you are not in the least late. But how tired you look, Joan. Tea will be ready in a few minutes, and I mean to take you to your room at once.'

'May Wanda and I come too, mummie?' But Silence shook her head,

'No, dear; I think Aunt Joan would be glad of a few minutes' quiet. And there is only time to make yourself tidy for tea.' And Jess, who was always on her best behaviour in her father's presence, only shrugged her shoulders pettishly as she followed Wanda to the room they shared together.

CHAPTER XVI

SILENCE

The mother is the real home-maker. It is her sweet life that gives the home its atmosphere. It is through her love that God comes first to her little children. The Rabbis used to say, 'God could not be everywhere, and therefore He made mothers.' The thought is very beautiful.— J. R. MILLER.

Silence is the best resolve for him who distrusts himself. — LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

SILENCE had been a very handsome girl when Heath Leigh had fallen in love with her and determined to make her his wife. And she was still a striking-looking woman, though critical people would complain that her face was wanting in expression, and that even statuesque beauty needed a little animation. But they would not have said this if they had seen her with her husband and children. Quiet as she undoubtedly was even with them, there was a sweetness in her smile and a tenderness in her thoughtful grey eyes which were as eloquent as speech. Silence had never been slim even as a girl—she had been cast in a generous mould —and her finely-proportioned figure had grown more massive, so that she fully looked her thirty-six years. Her chief drawback, and one which she strove vainly to overcome, was her excessive shyness with strangers

or in the company of people who were not congenial to her. Lady Dorothy could have sympathised with her on this point. But in very truth it must be conceded that Lady Dorothy's essays at conversation were brilliant in comparison with Silence's. Calls were Lenten penance to her soul; a neighbourly tea-party deprived the fairest afternoon of its charm.

'If I had only a grown-up daughter whom I could take with me!' she said once to her husband. 'Even now Wanda is so nicely behaved, and not a bit shy, for all people say about her being so quiet.'

'Oh, Wanda's all right,' was his reply. 'She is a very observant young person—we shall be proud of her some day. I wish I could spare time to go to the Deanery with you this afternoon, love, but I have the proofs of that pamphlet to correct.' Silence looked quite shocked at the idea.

'As though I would dream of such a thing, dear! I was only grumbling because it is such a lovely afternoon and the children wanted me to take them for a walk. And the Deanery drawing-room will be so hot and crowded, and I shall feel stupid and headachy as usual. But there, I will not keep you from your work, Heath'; and Silence went off to perform her penance.

'Is that the new Canon's wife?' asked one lady of her hostess.

'Yes, that is Mrs. Leigh. Would you like me to introduce you to her?'

'Yes—no, I think not. I believe I introduced myself just now—she seemed so out in the cold—but she certainly did not respond very graciously to my advances.'

'Oh, that is only her manner,' returned Mrs. Harding good-naturedly. 'Mrs. Leigh is a shy woman—

her husband told me so. She is one of those people who are worth knowing if one only penetrates through the crust.'

'I thought her very handsome,' returned Mrs. Radly —such an uncommon type; but I could not make way and our conversation died a natural death.' Then Mrs. Harding laughed.

'Oh, you must try again, Diana! I always do feel so sorry for shy people. I am quite sure they go through a martyrdom in their quiet way. But there, I see the Dean beckoning to me—I expect some more guests have arrived'; and Mrs. Harding hurried away.

Canon Leigh had lunched at the Deanery a few weeks before he took up his residence at St. Breda's Lodge, and had conceived the happy idea of enlisting the sympathy of the Dean's wife on behalf of Silence.

'My wife is painfully shy with strangers,' he said when he was alone with her after luncheon, 'and I am afraid she will find herself a little out of it at first.' Then Mrs. Harding, who was a good soul, promised to hold out the right hand of fellowship to Mrs. Leigh, and to make things as comfortable as possible for her. And she had certainly kept her word.

Canon Leigh knew perfectly well his wife's limitations—it was very unlikely that she would ever be popular in the Precincts—but he knew that she would do her best for his sake; and as he read Lady Mary's letter, he told himself that Joan's long visit would be a godsend to Silence, as she could go out with her and pilot her through her social difficulties.

'There is really no reason why they should not pull together comfortably for five or six months,' he went on, with a man's easy optimism. 'Silence is so sorry

for the girl, and means to be kind to her. If only Joan shows a little tact and discretion! I should like to give her a word when she comes. But no, on second thoughts, it is better to leave it—it might only put her back up.' But as Heath sat down to his writing-table, it was a foregone conclusion that, if friction should ensue, his sympathies would be enlisted on his wife's side, and that Joan would be put in her place.

Joan had no reason to complain of any lack of welcome that afternoon. Silence's kiss had been warm and sisterly, and she had insisted on sending the little girls away while she herself conducted Joan to her room.

St. Breda's Lodge, with its wide staircase and spacious hall and handsome, well-proportioned reception-rooms, was a striking contrast to the old Rectory, though there was still the same homelike atmosphere which denoted the presence of a home-loving woman. The drawing-room, which was on the first floor, had rather alarmed Silence, with its suggestions of social gatherings. But it was such a charming room, with such pleasant views from the windows, that she soon grew to love it, and had her own little corner, as she had in every other room, even in her husband's study. Heath would not have been satisfied if the little work-table and low chair, and glass screen to shield her from the blaze, had not found their accustomed place there.

The room set apart for Joan's use was small, but extremely bright and cheerful. A low window commanded a view of the side garden, with its long trim lawn and wide borders filled with herbaceous plants. A green door opened into a walled kitchen garden.

'I thought you meant Wanda to have this room?'

observed Joan in a tone of pleased surprise. 'You certainly said so at Christmas.'

'Yes, but Heath thought the old nursery made such a pleasant bedroom, and that there was no need for Wanda to have a room for herself, especially as Jess is so timid about sleeping alone.'

'That has always surprised me,' returned Joan, with an admiring glance at the toilet-cover. She knew the exquisite drawn-thread border was the work of Silence's skilful fingers. Her lace and embroidery filled Joan with secret envy. Work was Silence's one accomplishment.

'Yes, and I used to worry about it. But we have found out the cause, Joan. Leah, that red-haired housemaid who lived with us so long, was not as trustworthy as we thought, and when nurse was out, and Leah had to put Jess to bed, she told her silly tales of bogies and nonsense. The moment we found it out, Heath packed off the girl at once. But the mischief was done, and Jess flatly refuses to sleep alone, and she will have a light in the room too until Wanda goes to bed.'

'What a pity,' observed Joan thoughtfully, and her sympathy induced Silence to enlarge on the subject.

'I have tried to reason with Jess, and Heath has talked. But we have neither of us done much good. Jess declares that she doesn't really believe in bogies, not one little bit, but that she could not forget Leah's stories, and that the dark made her miserable. So we must just wait until she grows more sensible.'

Joan nodded and smiled as she smoothed her hair, and there was a brief silence. A minute later she said in her quick way:

'Silence dear, you and Heath were very good to

have me like this at a moment's notice. I do hope that I shall not be a trouble to you.'

A faint flush crossed Silence's face. 'Why should you be a trouble, dear? I am sure Heath and I will do all in our power to make you happy. Joan, I don't know how to say it, but ever since Lady Mary's letter came I have felt so sorry for you both.'

'I don't think Heath ought to have shown you that letter,' returned the girl in a low voice. But she stiffened visibly, and again Silence flushed.

'My husband never keeps anything from me,' were the words which rose to her lips. But she forbore to utter them. She only said quietly: 'He knew that anything that concerned our sister would interest me,' and this prettily-worded speech touched Joan.

'Thank you, Silence dear. Yes, I suppose he had to talk things over with you. But when one is sore and unhappy, everything seems to jar. I can't feel that I can talk about it, even to Heath—it has just to be borne.' And there was such pain in Joan's voice that Silence quite yearned to comfort her.

'I think I understand, dear,' she said slowly. 'When one feels very deeply about a thing, words seem so useless. One has just to live through the pain.'

'That is just it,' returned Joan hastily. 'But I know how kind you both mean to be to me.' And then she walked to the window as though to dismiss the subject, and as at that moment the tea-bell rang, Silence had no opportunity of saying more.

'It was nice of her to say that,' thought Joan. 'I daresay it has been my own fault, but I certainly never found Silence so affectionate and sisterly.' And Joan registered a private vow that this time she would do all in her power to keep the peace.

After tea the three boys and Jess went off to play cricket on the little green before the house, and Joan retired to her room to unpack her trunks. Wanda accompanied her. Wanda was a very neat-handed little person, and her father used laughingly to call her 'Fairy Order.' Joan, who was somewhat casual in her arrangements, secretly marvelled at her young niece's methodical and old-fashioned ways.

'You have creased that lovely white silk, Aunt Joan!' she exclaimed presently. 'I think we had better hang it up in the spare room wardrobe—it is quite empty. If you will wait a moment, I will run and ask mother.' And Wanda went off with a flushed and serious face to state the difficulty.

'Aunt Joan's wardrobe is not big, and she has brought so many things it is quite full, and so is the chest of drawers; there is not room really, mother, and there are all those evening dresses.'

Silence was quite equal to the occasion.

'Hang them all in the spare room wardrobe, we are not expecting any visitors just now.' And then Wanda with a relieved air went back to her work.

'She is your own daughter, love,' observed Heath, who had overheard this brief colloquy. 'One of these days Wanda will make as excellent a wife and housekeeper as her mother.' Heath was always paying these little lover-like compliments; perhaps he liked to see Silence's eyes grow bright and soft with pleasure. She rarely responded in words, but she never forgot one of those speeches, but kept them hoarded up in her memory.

When all was ship-shape and tidy, Wanda went off to feed her doves, and Joan sat down to write to Lady Mary. Only a few hours had passed since they had

parted, and yet there seemed so much to say that she had only just finished before the dressing-bell—which was also the signal for the children's school-room supper —sounded. Wanda presided over this meal, but during these holidays Vere had been invited to dine with his parents.

Canon Leigh never cared to linger long over his meals, and these spring evenings were so light and pleasant that he and Silence often strolled out into the Precincts after dinner. But this evening she made some excuse, and he asked Joan to accompany him.

They strolled slowly down the flagged path leading to the cloisters, and then turning to their right, past the baptistery and the door opening to the Deanery gardens, they made their way down a low passage into a wide court-way—the handsome Norman stair-case leading to one of the school-rooms of St. Breda's school was opposite to them ; then turning round, they skirted the wide green, where some of the boys were still playing. Here were the houses of the minor canons.

Joan was about to ask a question as they were passing a small sanatorium belonging to St. Breda's school, when Heath suddenly cleared his throat.

'Shall we turn back to the cloisters ; it is quiet there, and there is something I want to say to you?' And Joan, who was extremely quick-witted, understood why Silence had made that excuse and refused to accom-pany them.

'I am rather tired, Heath ; could we not wait until to-morrow?'

'My dear, I would not tire you for worlds ; but it seems strange, does it not, that some word should not pass between us on this very unpleasant business?'

'I don't think talking is likely to mend matters,' returned Joan ungraciously.

'No, my dear, probably not,' replied her brother quietly; 'but all the same I want you to feel how glad Silence and I are to have you with us. It has always seemed to me that my home ought to have been yours, but as long as you were happy, Joan, I did not grudge you to Lady Mary.'

'One cannot be always happy in this world,' replied the girl sadly. 'You and Silence are very kind, and I do not mean to be ungrateful, but there can be no home so dear to me as Morningside.' Then he gave her a quick, penetrating look.

'I know it, Joan. But I am sure you realise as much as we do that it will be impossible for you to go back as long as Captain Bastow is at Aldershot.'

'No, I suppose not.' But Joan spoke rather sullenly; she was in no mood for the conversation. The cloisters were dull and gloomy, and by mutual consent they had re-entered the Precincts.

'It is very wrong that you should be placed in such a position,' Heath went on, 'and we all feel it deeply on yours and on Lady Mary's account. I consider Captain Bastow has been extremely selfish, and I fear I am not in perfect charity with him.'

Joan stood still on the flagged pathway. A fair little moon had just risen and its faint beams were irradiating the ruined arches.

'Heath, I cannot bear this! Unless you wish to add to my trouble, you must not say hard things of Craig. He has done nothing wrong.'

'My dear Joan!'

'He has made a mistake, for which we are all suffering—he and I and my dear Lady Mary—but it is no

fault of his, only his misfortune, that he has fallen in love with the wrong person. He is brave and generous and true—the truest-hearted man I know—and yet you are all against him. It is not fair—it is not right,' continued the girl passionately, 'and I will not listen to you, Heath! You mean well, but we do not see things in the same light—and I am too tired to talk any more!' And before Heath could recover from his astonishment Joan turned quickly in at the gate of St. Breda's Lodge and made her way to her own room.

'Do you think she cares for him?' he asked, when he had repeated this conversation to his wife. Silence had listened quietly, without offering any interruption. She had told him that Joan seemed weary and sad, and had begged him to postpone his talk, but she would not remind him of this.

'I am very sorry that this should occur the first evening, dearest,' she said gravely.

'Oh, so am I, and I was a fool not to take your advice. But you have not answered my question.'

'I am not sure I can answer it. But I very much fear she does care for Captain Bastow, though she does not mean us to know it.'

Canon Leigh gave vent to a low whistle of dismay. 'It is a worse muddle than I thought,' he muttered. And again he lamented that he had not taken his wife's advice.

CHAPTER XVII

CRYPTIC PROWLS

Architecture is frozen music.—SCHELLING.

She was soothed into that wide-gazing calm which makes us older human beings, with our inward turmoil, feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky, or before a steady glowing planet, or a full-flowered eglantine, or the bending trees over a silent pathway.—GEORGE ELIOT.

CANON LEIGH sent a kind, brotherly message to Joan by his wife later on, and Silence willingly undertook the errand. 'Tell her that I am sorry that I bothered her with talk when she was so tired, and she is to put it all out of her head and go to sleep; and give her my love.'

Silence found Joan standing before the toilet-table. She had just removed her hat and was smoothing her roughened hair.

'Oh, why did you trouble, Silence!' she exclaimed. 'I was just coming down to wish you and Heath good-night.' Then Silence delivered her husband's message.

'There is no need for you to come down, Joan dear. You had far better go to bed and have a nice long sleep'; and Silence's tone was so motherly that it might have been addressed to Wanda.

Joan, who had repented of her hastiness, was secretly touched by this consideration. 'I am tired, certainly, so I think I will take your advice,' she returned. 'Will you give Heath my love, and tell him, please, that I did not mean to be ungracious. I only ran away because I really could not talk any more, and he was worrying me so dreadfully.'

'I don't think I will tell him that.'

'No, of course not. That last clause was only an aside, and not included in the message. But you may tell him, if you like, that though he meant to be kind and help me, it would be far wiser to leave me alone.' And as Silence gave a grave nod of assent to this, Joan continued hurriedly:

'It would be doing me a real kindness if you could make him understand this. I have quite enough to bear as it is, but it only adds to my unhappiness to see how unjust they all are to Craig. They think he is to blame, and call him selfish and inconsiderate—even my dear Lady Mary is hard on him—and it makes me so angry that I am obliged to take his part.'

'Yes, I see what you mean.' But something in Silence's manner brought an uneasy flush to the girl's face.

'No one need wonder at that,' she continued hastily. 'We are such old friends, Craig and I—for years we have been chums—it is only natural that I should try to defend him when people are so unjust to him. I would do as much for any one—a mere acquaintance; but for a real friend like Craig——' and here the proud young voice grew strangely soft.

'Don't trouble about it any more,' returned Silence gently. 'I think I can make Heath understand. Go to bed as quickly as you can, for you are quite worn

out, my dear; and perhaps things will look a little brighter to-morrow.' But, though Joan made no answer to this, she gave Silence a grateful kiss.

Poor child, such a wave of home-sickness and heart-sickness swept over her when she was left alone that she could only weep. But the tears relieved her, and as soon as she laid her head on the pillow she fell asleep from pure weariness.

Silence's face was a little grave as she went her rounds among her sleeping children, for she never retired to rest without performing this sacred duty. Any restless little being unable to sleep would watch for mother's step and shaded lamp. The next moment she would be bending over him or her; the hot pillow would be turned and bed-clothes straightened; if necessary, the burning face and hands sponged. 'Now you are comfy, darling? Lie still and the angel will come to you by and by.' For this pretty little legend of the Angel of Sleep had been Wanda's childish invention. 'When will the sleepy angel come, mummie?' she used to say in her baby days; 'I do want her to cuddle me.'

'Joan certainly cares for Craig Bastow,' Silence said to herself; 'her voice betrayed her to-night. She is not only fretting for Morningside and Lady Mary, there is another cause for her unhappiness. She has refused him; but if I am right and she really loves him, she has behaved like a heroine.'

Silence certainly felt an added respect for her young sister-in-law that evening. Their temperamental differences were so great that she had never really understood her, and she had never guessed at the hidden depths of the girl's nature. Joan was so tactless and trying, she trampled so ruthlessly on other people's

pet hobbies and fancies, her high spirits were so buoyant and her tongue so sharp-edged, that Silence had shrunk into her shell and left her severely alone. But this Joan with the sad, pathetic eyes was quite a different person.

If Silence could have followed the dictates of her kind heart she would have taken the girl in her motherly arms and tried to comfort her. But she was not sure that Joan would permit this. 'She has always kept me at a distance,' she thought sorrowfully; 'she would not care for me to be too demonstrative. But all the same I shall do all I can to shield her from annoyance. My dear Heath is a clever man, but I think in these matters women understand each other best, and it will be far wiser for him to leave her alone.'

Strange to say, though Silence was so full of sympathy for Joan, it never entered her head for a moment that this unfortunate love affair could ever end happily. Joan had behaved exceedingly well—far better than she would ever have expected—but, after all, she had only done her duty. Even if she returned Craig Bastow's affection, it would have been quite impossible for her to accept his offer in defiance of all his people's objections. Such a marriage would only prove disastrous, and Joan would never be happy under such circumstances. To have all her husband's relations looking down on her and holding aloof from her—how could Joan's proud spirit brook that! They would never forgive her for spoiling Craig's prospects—for Silence knew something of the Merriton troubles.

'We must just try to distract her thoughts and make her as happy as we can,' she observed to her

husband when she gave him that word of advice about leaving Joan alone for the present.

'I think I shall take her to Kenwyn to-morrow afternoon to call on Mrs. Ramsay; she and Joan have mutual friends at Herondale Rectory.' And Heath applauded this resolution.

But this little plan for Joan's entertainment proved a failure, for Canon Ramsay and his wife had gone up to town for the day.

It was Silence's custom when possible to attend the ten o'clock matins at the Cathedral. She said the beautiful, restful service seemed to help her through the day. She never invited any one to accompany her, and was secretly surprised when she found Joan in front of her in the stalls. And after that the girl was rarely absent, though she never joined Silence either before or after service. Joan loved to roam about at her own sweet will—to wander down the grand nave with its noble columns, or to linger in the side aisles and chapels. But most of all the crypt fascinated her. She was never weary of exploring it. The atmosphere of ancient peace, of historic memories and sacred associations, seemed to soothe her restlessness. She would sit for half-an-hour at a time in the dim little chapel where centuries ago a persecuted people had worshipped. Joan would try in a vague way to think out the puzzles and bewildering difficulties which had so suddenly confronted her. Now and then, when there were no echoing footsteps to be heard, she would put up a brief prayer for guidance and patience, for strength to bear a pain which sometimes seemed to be unbearable. How her Guardian Angel must have loved to hear these faltering petitions! Those quiet communings with her better nature always did Joan

good, and she would return to St. Breda's Lodge with a brighter face. On these occasions her letters to Morningside were so brave and healthy, in spite of an undercurrent of sadness, that Lady Mary would lay them down with a sigh of relief.

'Dear child, she is certainly doing her best to be good and brave,' she thought. And the answer which reached Joan always rewarded her for her efforts.

One morning, just as service was about to commence, Joan saw a prim, pretty-looking little woman slip rather shyly into the opposite stall. Joan wondered who she could be—if she were only a stranger from the town or if she belonged to the Precincts. She could not help noticing her, she had such a nice face and looked so peaceful and happy. But her curiosity was soon to be satisfied.

When service was over and they were descending the steps that led to the nave, Silence whispered that she meant to go out by the side door, as she wanted to speak to Mrs. Ramsay. 'Perhaps you will come too,' she suggested, 'for I would like to introduce you.' And Joan willingly assented.

She found, however, that no introduction was needed; for as soon as Mrs. Ramsay had greeted Silence, she held out her hand in quite a friendly manner to Joan.

'I am so glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Leigh. My nephew told me you were at St. Breda's Lodge; we saw him the other day in town. By the bye, I was so sorry to miss your kind visit,' turning to Silence. 'As the maid said there were two ladies, I conclude that Miss Leigh was with you?'

'Yes, I brought her as I knew you had mutual friends.'

'Oh, you mean the Rutherfords? They are dear people. I wonder'—and here Mrs. Ramsay spoke rather shyly—'whether you and Miss Leigh will waive ceremony and have tea with me to-morrow, and we could have a nice talk? I must not stop longer now, as I see my husband is waiting for me.' Then, after a moment's hesitation, Silence accepted the invitation.

'I had thought of walking over to Acrefield with the children to-morrow afternoon,' she observed, 'but it was a pity to refuse, as Mrs. Ramsay was kind enough to ask us. You see, Joan, I hardly know her yet, as she has only just come to Kenwyn. It was really my first call on Tuesday; I was introduced to her by Mrs. Harding when we were all taking refuge from the rain at Drummond's Library, and I rather liked her then.'

'Oh, so do I,' returned Joan eagerly; 'she has such soft eyes, and looks such a peaceful, gentle sort of person; and I have heard so much of her from Prudence and Mr. Trafford.'

'In that case I am glad I did not refuse,' returned Silence, who was secretly much pleased with Joan's obvious interest. And after this they separated, as Joan wanted to go back for one of her cryptic prowls, as she called them.

When she appeared at the luncheon-table a little late as usual, Jess looked at her in an injured manner.

'Oh, where have you been, Aunt Joan, all these hours?' she asked reproachfully. 'The new croquet set has arrived from the Stores, and we wanted you to be the first to see it. It is really mother's birthday present from father, because the old set is so shabby and all

the paint worn away. The new one is boxwood and quite nice and shiny.'

'Oh, shut up, Bill, and go on with your luncheon,' observed Vere. But Jess was not to be repressed.

'Father says we must not play for another fortnight or three weeks, as the lawn is not in order. And I am afraid mother does not want us to use the new set.'

'Of course not, Jess; they are for your mother and her visitors,' returned her father good-humouredly; 'the old set is quite good enough for the likes of you.' Jess tossed her head in an offended way.

'When I have children,' she remarked severely, 'I shall give them the very best of everything, and all the nicest and newest things, and not save them for stupid old visitors.' And the burst of laughter that greeted this sally drove Jess to offended silence.

It was Noel who resumed the conversation. 'Were you walking all the time, Aunt Joan?' he asked solemnly; 'and aren't you very tired?'

'Bless me, what inquisitive children!' returned Joan rather impatiently. Then, as her small nephew looked alarmed at this, she relented.

'No, Noel dear, I was trying to improve my education by studying architecture; only, to my disgust, I found I knew nothing—not one little bit, as Bill says. Heath, you must really go round with me one morning. I have got so dreadfully mixed with regard to Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular styles. I heard some one saying the other day to his companion, a clergyman, that "certain peculiarities and diversity of styles gave a sort of mosaic-like beauty when one surveyed the building from the choir."'

'Well, that is true, Joan. But I understand your difficulty,' returned her brother, 'and when I am not

quite so busy I will trot you round; but, to tell you the truth, I am not much of an authority. Canon Courtland is the man for you.'

'Oh no, I would rather go with you, Heath. And you might lend me some book to help me. I really do think that architecture must be an awfully interesting study—it seems to grow on one. I think, if I had been a man, I would have chosen that profession.' But here Vere interposed.

'It was only at Christmas that you told us that you would like to be a doctor—a woman doctor, I think you said—that it was the noblest profession in the world. Don't you remember, Wanda, how Aunt Joan harangued us for an hour on end?'

'Well, I daresay I did,' returned Joan, without waiting for Wanda's answer. 'But I have changed my mind since then. I should not care to study anatomy—bones must be so dry,' with a gesture of disgust. 'Not that I don't approve of women doctors, Vere. What would they do without them for Zenana work?' Then she added boldly: 'And I don't see why women should not be architects as well as artists; in my opinion it is certainly a ladylike profession. Don't you agree with me, Silence?'

'I don't think I do, Joan,' returned her sister-in-law rather nervously. The conversation had somewhat bewildered her; she could not quite understand Joan's sudden passion for architecture. She loved the Cathedral—it always rested and calmed her—but she knew nothing about Early English and Perpendicular styles. The little Heath had told her had escaped her memory. She knew it was all vast and beautiful; and sometimes on Sunday evenings, when she looked at the choir with its long lines of light, and listened to the

boys' sweet voices, she would be reminded of the heavenly Temple which needed no light, where she hoped to worship one day with her beloved ones.

Heath had noticed his wife's embarrassment. 'Come, Joan,' he said, linking his hand through her arm, 'let us go to the study and hunt for the book you want. I will try to get off for an hour to-morrow to give you your first lesson in architecture.'

CHAPTER XVIII

'I WILL SEE YOU THROUGH IT'

Life is made up not of great sacrifices or duties, but of little things, in which smiles and kindness, and small obligations, given habitually, are what win and preserve the heart and secure comfort.— Sir HUMPHRY DAVY.

Keep up your spirits.—HERODOTUS.

THE visit to Kenwyn was a great success, and even Silence owned to her husband that it was the first time she had really enjoyed a tea-party at St. Breda's. 'But Mrs. Ramsay is such a homely, comfortable sort of person,' she added, 'that it is impossible to be shy with her.'

Kenwyn was an old-fashioned house with a long slip of side-garden. The front windows commanded the narrow green and row of elms; but from the garden and back windows there was a charming view of the Cathedral towers, where the jackdaws built their nests.

It was rather an unpretentious-looking house, but the rooms were comfortable and homelike.

When the maid ushered them into the drawing-room Joan gave a little start of pleasurable surprise at the sight of Dick Trafford's lean, sunburnt face. He was lying back in an easy-chair with the bulldog at his

feet. As he jumped up, Dagon gave a little 'glump' of pleasure at recognising an old acquaintance; but as Silence responded to her hostess's greeting she regarded the great beast with such evident nervousness that Dick hastened to reassure her.

'You need not be afraid of my dog, Mrs. Leigh; Dagon is as gentle as a lamb. I wish his master had a tithe of his good temper. If there were such things as angelic bulldogs, he would certainly be one. Why, my aunt loves him. Don't you, Aunt Felicia?'

'Well, Dick, I can hardly go as far as that. As long as he keeps his distance I can tolerate him.' And then Mrs. Ramsay settled her guests cosily near the low tea-table. Dick, who had arrived unexpectedly the previous evening, had assured his married 'maiden aunt' that Felicia Ramsay looked twenty years younger than Felicia Graham. 'Any stranger would take you for a woman of thirty-eight years of age,' he said seriously. 'Really, if matrimony achieves these astonishing results, it is almost enough to tempt a confirmed old bachelor to change his mind.'

'Hear, hear, Trafford!' observed Canon Ramsay approvingly; 'I will drink your health after that'; for they were still at the dinner-table when this little speech was made.

'Nonsense, Dick,' returned Felicia, blushing. And then she added in a coaxing voice, 'Oh, Dick, if you would only settle down and have a home of your own!' But Dick shook his head.

'I never loved a dear gazelle—you remember that record speech of my namesake, the immortal Dick Swiveller—but she was sure to marry the market-gardener.' But, in spite of his whimsical smile, there

was a queer look in Dick's eyes, as though he remembered a certain fickle-minded 'queen of curds and cream.' 'It is an unhappy fact, Aunt Felicia, that if I am the least attracted by any one I am sure to be told the next moment that she is either married or engaged.'

'Dear me, what a pity!' observed his sympathising relative. But Canon Ramsay's eyes twinkled with amusement; he was beginning to find his wife's nephew rather original and entertaining.

'Oh, we will not despair yet,' returned Dick cheerfully, as he cracked his Brazil nuts—a proceeding which brought Dagon to his side. 'That's your share, old fellow,' he said, picking him two of the most tempting kernels. 'Kittens and Brazil nuts are Dagon's pet weaknesses; but, as you see, I am obliged to limit him with regard to nuts. No, my good aunt, where there is life there is hope. Latterly I have had an idea of educating some young orphan whose parents were known to be fairly respectable and sane people. I draw the line at criminality or insanity,' went on Richard, frowning over his words, 'and it must be understood that my orphan must be good-looking.'

'Dick doesn't mean half he says,' interposed Felicia, with an anxious glance at her husband. But though Canon Ramsay was quite aware of this, he chose to carry on the pleasant fooling.

'The idea is not original, I suppose it has been carried out over and over again, and sometimes with happy results. The only drawback is that it is a waiting game.'

'Oh, there is no hurry, and I am only thirty-two. As I have no wish to settle at my ease for ten or twelve years, I have plenty of time for selection and

education. It might be an interesting experiment,' answered Dick thoughtfully, 'only a trifle costly.'

Felicia could not help thinking of this conversation as she noticed the friendly greeting that passed between Dick and Joan. Had she been one of those gazelles that he had mentioned? But, as far as she knew, the girl was not engaged.

Felicia certainly looked her best this afternoon, in her brown dress and soft creamy ruffles. In spite of her grey hair, she did not look her age. Her figure was still young and girlish, and in her husband's eyes she grew every day more and more like the old Felicia. Love is proverbially blind, and he ceased to notice the lines and fading of tints and the little primnesses and methodical ways. Felicia was gentle and humble, so grateful for her new happiness, so touchingly careful for her husband's comforts, that Canon Ramsay regarded his second marriage as a great success.

'If only my boys could know what a stepmother they have got,' he would say sometimes. 'I have promised Basil to send him the best photo I can get, Felicia. We must have one taken without delay.'

All Canon Ramsay's sons had sent pleasant little greeting notes to Felicia enclosed in their letters to their father. But Basil's gave her most pleasure.

'It has always been my belief that those who have gone before into the other world,' he wrote, 'are able in some way to enter into the joys and sorrows of those they loved here. And if I am right, I can imagine how our dear mother will rejoice to know that father has so kind a companion to cheer his loneliness. I know Malcolm and Walter are as relieved as I am

that he has some one to care for him.' Felicia's eyes were wet as she handed Basil's letter to her husband.

'Oh, the dear fellow!' he murmured huskily. 'Felicia, you have no idea how good that boy is. He is a perfect saint, and yet as manly as any of them. I wonder if any father ever had better sons! But it is Basil who never forgets his mother,' he finished softly.

Felicia left Dick to entertain Joan while she talked to Silence. A happy intuition led her to select the very subject which most interested her guest.

'Is that exceedingly pretty little girl I saw with you in the Cathedral your eldest daughter?'

'Oh, do you mean Wanda?' returned Silence, with unusual animation. 'I am so glad you think her pretty. Yes, she is my eldest. She is only just twelve, but she has such womanly little ways already.'

'My husband noticed her too.' Felicia had not yet learnt to pronounce these two words 'my husband' without a faint, conscious blush. 'I have to look at my wedding-ring sometimes,' she said once naïvely to him, 'to be sure that I am not dreaming that I am married.' She was always making these odd, tender little speeches to him. Poor dear Felicia, her happiness had come to her so late in life that she could not believe in its reality.

'He is very fond of children,' she went on, 'and he would have liked to have had a daughter. As we walked home that day he said that he had seen such a handsome little girl, and that he thought she must be Mrs. Leigh's daughter. "She was so attentive and nicely-behaved that I could not help noticing her," he went on. I must tell him her name is Wanda; it is such an uncommon name.'

'Yes; it was a curious fancy of my husband's, but

it was a long time before I could reconcile myself to it. I wanted so much to call her Mary, it is my favourite name. But when Jessica was born I felt bound to give her my mother's name.'

'It is pretty too; but I agree with you that there is no name like Mary,' returned Felicia. And then Canon Ramsay joined them and there were fresh introductions.

Joan liked the look of him. She thought he had a nice clever rugged face, though he stooped a good deal and his white hair and spectacles made him appear fully his age. It was rather difficult, certainly, to realise that he had only just returned from his honeymoon. But Joan's quick eyes noticed the quiet satisfaction with which he regarded his wife.

'This is your first tea-party, Felicia,' he said, as she handed him the cup which was always reserved for him. And Felicia blushed and smiled assent.

Joan was enjoying herself so much that she was quite sorry when Silence gave the signal for their departure. Dick Trafford walked with them across the green bare-headed. He had not quite exhausted the subject that he and Joan were discussing, and he only left them at the gate of St. Breda's Lodge.

'What a singular person Mr. Trafford seems,' observed Silence dubiously. 'He is very good-looking and amusing, but so extremely unconventional. Fancy walking all this way without his hat! I saw Mrs. Anderson looking at us in quite a surprised way.' For this was before the 'hatless brigade' became notable.

'I think he is delightful,' returned Joan, 'and I hope we shall see a great deal of him. You might have asked him to come in, Silence; Heath is sure to be at home.'

'Oh dear, I never thought of it! But he had that dreadful dog with him, and I should have been afraid of the children.'

'You know Mr. Trafford told you how gentle and harmless he is,' replied Joan reproachfully. 'But never mind, he would only think you a little stiff. And oh, why did you hurry away so? Canon Ramsay and Mr. Trafford and I were having such an interesting talk.'

'Hurry away, my dear Joan! Are you aware we have been at Kenwyn quite an hour and a half? And it was our first visit too. But,' her voice changing, 'I am glad you enjoyed it; I thought it very pleasant myself.' And then they went into the study, and Joan talked with so much animation of their visit that her brother looked quite pleased.

'It has done her good,' he said to his wife, when the girl had left them; 'she wants taking out of herself. I have not seen Trafford yet, but I mean to call on him. I tell you what, Silence, I think we had better ask them to dinner. We might get the Harcourts to meet them. They have shown us a good deal of attention, and they don't leave St. Breda's until the week after next.' Canon Harcourt was their next-door neighbour. His wife was an extremely dignified person, and Silence stood greatly in awe of her.

'Oh, Heath, surely that is not necessary,' returned Silence nervously. The idea was appalling. They had never had people to dine at the Rectory. This was what she had dreaded when they came to St. Breda's. More than once Heath had hinted at such a thing, but she had always changed the subject. 'You know Vere is going back to Winchester this week,' she added.

'I was not thinking of this week, my dear,' he returned mildly, but something in his manner told Silence that he intended to carry his point. 'The Harcourts do not leave until Thursday week, so next Tuesday will do nicely. Come, love, don't look so alarmed, the thing is not as difficult as you suppose. You have good servants, an excellent cook, and Joan will be able to give you a helping hand with the menu and table decorations. They often had guests at Morningside; she will put you up to all the latest dodges.' And as Heath said this he looked at his wife's solemn face very kindly.

'Heath, you know I have never given a dinner-party in my life!'

'Dinner-party—tut, nonsense! We are only asking two or three friendly neighbours to dinner. Let me see, the Harcourts and Ramsays and Trafford. We shall only be eight altogether. Just fish and soup and an entrée will be enough. Warren stews pigeons to perfection. You must talk to Joan; she will give you all the hints you want. I don't think we shall have any reason to be ashamed of our silver and entrée dishes. Some of them have never even seen the light.'

'Do you really mean it seriously?' Silence looked quite pale as she put the question. Then Heath, who was standing beside her, laughed and kissed her.

'Yes, I am quite serious, love. When I came to St. Breda's I knew we should have to discharge certain social functions. But I do not intend to burden you more than I can help. We will have no formal dinner-parties or entertainments, but as far as possible we will welcome our neighbours in a friendly way. Come, Silence'—with the least trace of impatience in his

manner—'don't look at me as though I were inflicting a hateful task on you. We must do our duty in the state of life to which we are called.'

Silence made no answer to this, but as the dressing-bell sounded she quietly left the room. Her husband's will was supreme in the household, and she had never yet rebelled against it. 'It almost makes me wish to be back at the dear old Rectory,' she said to herself, 'in spite of the dismal garden and smoky atmosphere.' And yet, as Silence cherished this repining thought, she knew that Heath had asked nothing unreasonable; that with their beautiful house and ample means he had a right to expect that his friends should be entertained.

Most women would have been proud to have an opportunity to show such fine and dainty napery and massive silver. Warren would have been a treasure to any housekeeper, and was capable of sending up a dinner fit for any one. The parlour-maid understood her duties, and even the housemaid could wait. With such well-oiled machinery Silence had certainly no legitimate cause for such sinkings of heart and failure of courage. 'What would you do if Heath were to be made a bishop,' Joan had once said to her, 'and you had to entertain all the clergy of the diocese and their wives?' Silence remembered this speech as she went to her room.

Joan wondered several times that evening what could be amiss with Silence, she was so exceedingly glum—that was the only word that occurred to her. Had Heath found fault with her? had they had words? But both these things were so extremely improbable that she had to dismiss them from her mind. Heath rarely found fault with his wife, and

they certainly never quarrelled. A more united couple never lived. And yet even Wanda noticed her mother seemed out of sorts, the child was so observant.

'Does your head ache, mother dear?' she asked as they went into the drawing-room. 'You do look so tired. Shall I fetch your eau de Cologne?'

'No dearest, my head does not ache,' returned Silence hastily, for she was afraid her husband would overhear this. And then she sat down to her work, and Joan joined the children in a round game until they went to bed.

'I wonder what Heath is doing,' Joan observed as she joined Silence in her corner.

'He has some work to finish this evening; he will come up by and by.'

Joan fingered the silks on the little table. 'Is anything the matter, Silence?' she asked by and by. 'You look so worried.' Silence put down her work with a sigh.

'It is stupid of me to be worried, and of course you will only laugh at me; but if you know how I hate the idea of it.'

'It—what on earth do you mean?' inquired Joan curiously.

'It is only that Heath has been talking about the Ramsays, and he thinks we ought to ask them and Mr. Trafford to dinner.'

'What a nice idea! Heath is a dear old brick for suggesting such a thing! Well, Silence?'

'And he wants to have the Harcourts to meet them. There, I knew you would laugh, Joan. You think me absurd for putting myself in a fever at the bare idea. We never had people at the Rectory, and the idea of a dinner-party scares me. But Heath says it must be

done, and that you would help me.' And Silence looked at her so beseechingly and helplessly that Joan bit her lip to conceal her smile.

'My dear woman, of course I will help you,' she returned seriously. 'I know all about these little informal dinners. The dining-room at Morningside is not large, and Lady Mary never would have more than eight—just two couples and Lady Dorothy and her brother. Why, I remember the last one—there were Mr. Rutherford and Prudence, and that nice old Colonel Pendleton and his eldest daughter—he is a widower, you know—and Dorcas and Craig. Oh, it was the nicest evening we ever had, and it was so informal and easy!' And here Joan with difficulty suppressed a sigh.

'Could you—do you think you could remember the menu?' asked Silence anxiously. Then Joan broke into a little laugh. There was something so droll in the contrast between the grand frame and Madonna face and the childlike timidity. But as Silence drew herself up in rather an affronted way, Joan laughed again.

'Oh, Silence, how funny you are—you make me laugh just when I want to be serious! Of course I remember the menu, for I wrote them all out myself—I always did for "the Eights," as I called them. And now we are going to have an "Eight" at St. Breda's Lodge, and if you want help I am your woman, and we will just have the nicest little dinner-table you ever saw, if you will only leave it to me.' And Joan looked so sanguine, so cocksure of herself, that Silence drew a relieved breath.

'Oh, Joan, if you will only see me through it!' she said solemnly.

'Of course I will see you through it! But here comes Heath, and he must not guess we have been talking about it—we have to surprise him, you know.' And though Silence was generally rather slow-witted, she actually took the hint.

CHAPTER XIX

A MEMBER OF THE HUMANE SOCIETY

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

EMILY DICKINSON.

CANON LEIGH was right. The little excitement had done Joan good, and she looked more like her old self the next morning than she had done since she had come to St. Breda's. Joan was really so much younger than her age, there was something so buoyant and childlike in her nature that would not always be repressed. She was too full of life, of growth, and youthful hope to allow herself to be absolutely crushed by misfortune. Her troubles were very real; she could not marry the man she loved, and there was a harrowing fear in her secret mind that she might not be able to return to her beloved Lady Mary and Morningside perhaps for years, and yet the sunshine of a spring day, or the fluting of a thrush, or the burgeoning of the polished chestnut buds, or the sight of tasselled catkins on the limes and willows, seemed to fill her with renewed life.

'One must always hope for the best,' she wrote in one of her letters to Lady Mary. 'This morning the sky is so blue, and Wanda's doves are cooing so deliciously in the sunshine, that I feel as though something unexpected and pleasant must happen, and that my troubles are rather like the bad dreams which fade away in daylight.'

'One must always hope,' that was so like Joan; but probably, though she would not have owned it even to herself, Joan's improved spirits were owing to the fact that Lady Mary's letters contained no special news about Lady Cicely.

'I hope Cicely O'Brien is enjoying herself,' she wrote once, 'but things are rather quiet at the Abbey just now. Craig comes very little; he says he is too busy, but his mother does not seem quite pleased about it. They are making up a party for Aldershot to-morrow, and he has promised to come back with them for the evening. Of course I see the girls every day, and the more I see of Cicely, the better I like her. She is a nice, bright-natured girl, and so unselfish. I am to dine with them this evening, Lady Merriton insists on it.'

'In vain is the snare laid in sight of the bird,' thought Joan, as she perused this letter. 'If they had only left Craig alone for a little before they hatched out their little schemes. Why, even if he felt inclined, Craig would be ashamed to make love to another girl quite so soon'; and Joan's lip curled a little contemptuously at the thought of Lady Merriton's denseness and want of perception. But all the same she waited rather anxiously for the next letter.

'I am afraid I have nothing very amusing to tell you, my dear Joan,' wrote her faithful correspondent. 'Thursday was not a success. It was very wet in the afternoon, and they had to take shelter in Craig's quarters. Unfortunately, his duties prevented him from being with them until it was nearly

time to go back. Colonel Hamilton gave them tea, and two or three officers were in attendance; but Dorothy did not think Cicely enjoyed herself. To make things worse, Craig had had a fagging day, and was really tired, and not at all inclined to make himself agreeable, though he did his best, poor boy. I thought the evening a little flat myself, though Cicely sang charmingly. They are dining at the Rectory to-morrow. Craig is invited, but I am not sure that he will be able to go.'

In her next letter Lady Mary wrote chiefly about her eldest nephew.

Josselyn is so much better that he intends to make a move soon. Some friends of his are going to Switzerland, and as a young doctor is to be one of the party, he means to take him as his travelling physician. My brother and Lady Merriton have written to entreat him to come straight to the Abbey, but he will not hear of it. He has really no regard for his parents' feelings. If Josselyn had been my son, I think his selfishness and want of filial love would have broken my heart long ago. He has not even told them when he means to start. Dorothy declares that he had probably left Cairo before his last letter reached them. They have quite made up their minds to go to him as soon as they know his address, and I think myself that this is the best plan. Of course Dorothy means to go too. In that case I really think I shall take a little change myself. I should rather like a fortnight or three weeks at Folkestone. If I carry out this little project, do you think Heath would let you join me there?

It was this last clause in Lady Mary's letter that made Joan's eyes sparkle.

'Oh, how dear of her to think of it!' she said to herself. 'But I will not hint at such a thing to either Heath or Silence, in case it does not come to pass.' And then she put away the letter, and went in search of Wanda, who was much depressed by the fact that Vere had returned to Winchester that morning. Joan

had promised to do some errand in the town for her sister-in-law, and she thought the walk would do Wanda good. The other children were painting in the schoolroom.

Wanda was quite willing to accompany her aunt, and they set off hastily, with Rascal racing ahead of them. It was a lovely May afternoon, and as soon as Joan had finished her business she proposed that they should take a turn on St. Michael's Parade. In summer-time it was a favourite promenade for the citizens of St. Breda's. The terrace on the top of the ramparts, with its picturesque watch-towers and sheltered seats, was exceedingly pleasant, and on warm days the trim lawns and pleasant beds in the enclosure below, and the shady lime avenue, offered a delightful retreat.

On this afternoon it was unusually quiet; only a few children were playing on the grass or running up and down the mounds.

As they walked up the lime avenue Joan drew a deep breath of satisfaction; for the love of nature was strong within her, and it was a perfect joy to her to see the tender green leafage turning gold in the sunshine as it rippled and swayed in the fresh breeze.

'Oh, it is too delicious!' she exclaimed, and then she interrupted herself.

'Wanda, will you sit down a moment on that bench? I must really go and speak to those boys; I am sure they are bullying the little one.' And Joan went swiftly across the grass; quite unconscious that a pair of amused, quizzical eyes were watching her.

A minute later, Wanda was aware that a tall, good-looking man, with an ugly brindled bulldog waddling behind him, was approaching the seat. To her surprise, he raised his hat and accosted her in a pleasant voice.

'I saw you with Miss Leigh just now. I am sure you are Canon Leigh's daughter.'

Now Wanda, in spite of her quiet disposition, was not at all shy.

'I think you must be Mr. Trafford,' she returned composedly, 'and that must be the bulldog that frightened mother so when she was having tea with Mrs. Ramsay. Oh, please, I don't want him to come too close'—as Dagon, breathing hard, was preparing to make friendly overtures. Then Dick, with a resigned air, seated himself and took the thick clumsy head between his knees.

'Never mind, old fellow,' he said caressingly. 'No one but your master appreciates you, and he knows that you are worth your weight in gold. We will stick to each other, Dagon, however the world may malign and misunderstand us.' And then, in a wheedling tone, 'You see I have him quite safe, and if you were to pat his head I am sure he would take it kindly.' And Wanda, after a moment's hesitation, extended a small and rather shaking hand.

'He can't help being ugly,' she said half to herself.

'No, and it is a pity to hurt his feelings. Do you know, Miss Leigh, if I stay long at Kenwyn—but I am rather a waif and stray, you see—I think I shall get hold of some school-room and give a demonstration lecture on bulldogs in general, and Dagon in particular.'

'Oh, shall you really!' But Wanda was puzzled, she did not quite know whether he was joking or in earnest. His expression was quite grave.

'I expect your aunt will applaud the idea. I think the demonstration part will be singularly effective. I shall have a basket of kittens of all ages on the platform, and a paper bag of Brazil nuts, and put Dagon

through all his parlour tricks. 'My word,' breaking off suddenly, 'those young rascals don't seem to be inclined to let the boy go! I shall have to go to the rescue.'

'Oh no, Aunt Joan is scolding them—there, the biggest one is skulking off, and she has got hold of the little one's hand. It is all right, she will be here directly.'

Dick sat down again.

'I was just going to send Dagon to investigate matters. Oh, he would not have touched one of them,' as Wanda looked alarmed at the mere idea; 'he would have simply looked at them until they fled trembling. He is a moral policeman, is Dagon. Ah, here comes the conquering heroine! She is sending the victim away smiling; I bet you anything he is hiding coin of the realm in his grubby little fist.'

Joan, flushed, indignant, and triumphant, came towards them.

'I caught sight of Dagon,' she said, smiling at Dick, 'when I was pitching into those little savages. Why are boys such brutes sometimes? they were frightening that poor child to death.'

'Oh, we have all of us been brutes in our time, I daresay,' replied Dick cheerfully. 'I am only generalising on the subject of boys. I never look back on my young days without uncomfortable twinges of conscience for speckled eggs taken out of nests, frogs harnessed to toy chariots, baby thrushes and blackbirds starved by ignorance, not unkind intent, harrowing funeral of slaughtered innocents, with nightmares of pecking and outraged parents of prodigious size. Oh, I could hold forth for hours on the human boy!' And then, warming to his subject, 'If, as Wordsworth says, "heaven lies about us in our infancy," there are few celestial traces

to be found in the young, growing, undeveloped creature. Boy is a playing, fighting animal, he is unsentimental, well—if you care to state it boldly—unfeeling to the last degree; he bullies the weak, he toadies the strong. It is the survival of the fittest. But one of these days Boy will rub his eyes and see things in a different light; then he will understand what true manliness means. And "cherchez la femme!"' finished Dick, with an inscrutable smile.

Wanda listened to this long harangue with a bewildered and thoughtful expression; then she fixed her large dark eyes on Dick's face. 'I don't think you meant to be cruel,' she said slowly, 'though it was not kind to take those poor little birds out of their warm nests and put them in a cage. Vere and Frank never did such a thing; when they wanted eggs for their collections, they always left one or two for the poor mother. I don't believe they ever did really cruel things in their lives—do you, Aunt Joan? But of course you did not mean it,' observed Wanda graciously.

'I don't believe I did,' returned Dick with a kind smile. 'But, don't you know, Miss Wanda, that "evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart"? Not being a thrush mother, I was quite ignorant how frequently the youngster needed nourishment, and it never entered my head that they wanted warmth; when these facts were pointed out to me, on the eve of that harrowing funeral I mentioned, I wept with remorse, and refused to be comforted unless the cat and cockatoo attended the function attired in long crape streamers.'

It was impossible not to laugh. Then Dick, who was bent on vindicating himself in the little girl's eyes,

remembered a certain good work of his which would reinstate him in her good opinion.

'I atoned for my childish sins later, when I posed as a liberator of larks. Have you ever seen a newly-caged lark, Miss Wanda?' And as she shook her head—'Then you have been spared a painful sight. To see the poor little beggar try to rise in that infamous little box of a cage—oh, it got on my nerves. And I had a perfect craze for haunting the Seven Dials and other mean localities, on my quest for larks. My maiden aunt used to remonstrate with me on the shillings I spent so freely. "I am sorry enough for all caged things," she said, "but when the children need bread——" But I would not listen to her.'

'Oh, I am so glad!' exclaimed Wanda. 'Oh, do please tell us what you did next!'

'Well, then, when I had a sufficient number of little boxes, I engaged a hansom and had myself driven to some nice open space—Hampstead Heath or Regent's Park or Wimbledon Common. I always chose a lonely part where there were no onlookers. Then I opened the cage doors. I remember on one occasion the driver was so taken aback by my humane proceedings that I heard him mutter, "Blest if he is not the rummiest cove that I have seen for a long day! Shouldn't be surprised if he is from Hanwell." But I rather fancy he had had a drop too much. On another occasion my driver, a good-looking young chap, was quite excited. 'I call that real sport, sir,' he said. And I was so much pleased with his sympathy that I gave him an additional shilling.

'Sport indeed—I should think so! If only you could have seen it, the way the little creature perched palpitating on the threshold of the cage, and then went

up like a rocket. Sometimes I could hear it trilling as it went; it used to make me feel quite lively.'

'What did you do with the cages?' asked Wanda, for she was a practical little person.

'I used to break them to pieces with my stick, until my sympathising friend begged me to let him take them home. "My youngsters have got a linnet, and I think I could make quite a roomy cage out of all those small ones." That day I went home a proud man; for not only had I set prisoners free, but I was housing the homeless. But I had to give it up after that,' continued Dick regretfully. 'Rutherford broke me of the habit; he said I was just encouraging the bird-catchers, and that I should become notorious in Whitechapel and the Seven Dials as "the larking gent." But at least I have set a hundred captives free to soar to heaven's gate,' concluded Dick virtuously.

'Oh, Aunt Joan, I never heard anything more interesting!' exclaimed Wanda. 'I am going to write to Vere to-morrow, and I shall tell him all about the larks. Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Trafford. I think it was so nice of you to think of it.' And from that day Richard Trafford the Waif and Stray was a hero in Wanda's eyes.

'We must really go home now,' observed Joan, and Dick accompanied them until they had reached the Precincts.

'Aunt Joan,' observed Wanda, when Dick had taken leave of them, 'I had no idea that Mr. Trafford was such a nice man. Mother said he was amusing and funny, and so he is, but he has such a kind face.' And Joan quite coincided in this opinion.

'That is the prettiest little girl I have seen for a long time,' thought Dick as he strolled across to the

tobacconist's. 'I like her stately little ways; I should not be surprised if she grows into a beautiful woman in a few years' time. If she had only been an orphan!' And then Dick chuckled inwardly as he remembered Aunt Felicia's expression when he propounded his views with regard to his future wife's training.

CHAPTER XX

'MY TEXT IS FROM THOMAS À KEMPIS'

Temptations are often very profitable to us, though they be troublesome and grievous; for in them a man is humbled, purified, and instructed.—THOMAS À KEMPIS.

All love renders wise in its degree.—BROWNING.

THE Harcourts and Ramsays accepted the invitation, and Joan threw herself with her accustomed energy into the preparations for 'the Eight.'

'I will see you through it,' she had said to Silence, and she certainly kept her word. When Canon Leigh hinted to her that he feared that the number mentioned would work out rather awkwardly at the table, Joan refused to listen to him.

'Ask two more people!' she said indignantly. 'My dear Heath, how could you be so inconsiderate. I will not have poor Silence put upon. She is quite nervous enough already.'

'One may as well be hanged for stealing a sheep as for a lamb,' returned her brother drily. But Joan took no notice of this grim little joke.

'I would not have you suggest such a thing to Silence for worlds,' she replied seriously; 'it would be the last straw. What does it matter if I have

to sit by Mrs. Ramsay, and that Mr. Trafford will be at your left hand instead of Mrs. Harcourt—they will understand? At Morningside the table was round, and we always seated our people properly. You can easily explain things beforehand to Mrs. Harcourt.' And Joan carried her point.

Silence was perfectly docile, and accepted all Joan's suggestions with the utmost meekness. Joan wrote out one of the Morningside menus, and with a few necessary changes such as the season required, it met with Warren's approval.

'It could not be better, ma'am,' she said to her mistress; 'there will be enough and to spare without wasteful extravagance. You need not fear for my cooking. Many a dinner have I sent up for twelve or fourteen persons, and have been complimented afterwards by the master himself.' And Warren seemed to expand with extreme self-satisfaction at the recollection.

Joan carried out her scheme of table decoration very successfully. The pink tulips and white narcissi were arranged with such effect that Heath looked at his wife with marked approval.

'I never saw anything prettier,' he said; 'the Harcourts' table was quite ordinary in comparison.'

'It was Joan's doing,' returned Silence in rather an embarrassed voice. 'You have no idea how good and helpful she has been'; and Heath nodded, he guessed far more than they suspected.

More than once, when Canon Leigh had finished his talk with the happy-looking elderly bride, he glanced somewhat anxiously at the stately figure and Madonna face opposite to him. Joan's eyes often wandered in the same direction. 'How handsome

Silence is!' she said to herself. 'One could almost call her a beautiful woman. But if she would only smile now and then. I can see Canon Ramsay has hard work to keep up the conversation, and his neighbour seems so pleased with Mr. Trafford that she hardly takes any notice of the poor man. Canon Harcourt seems to have given up all hope of interesting her, and that is why he talks to me. But men are so stupid; he might have guessed that architecture and politics would not interest a woman like Silence.'

There was no doubt that Canon Harcourt found Joan a far more amusing companion than his hostess. 'Mrs. Leigh is a most distinguished-looking woman,' he said to his wife as they turned in at their garden gate in the moonlight, 'and I expect her husband finds her a domestic treasure, but she is heavy in hand. I started half-a-dozen subjects, but she did not seem to have much to say in answer. It was quite a relief to talk to Miss Leigh—she is so bright and original.'

'Oh, and so is Mr. Trafford. I don't think I ever enjoyed myself more. He amused me so much that I could hardly eat my dinner. I am quite sorry that we cannot ask him and the Ramsays to dinner before we go, but it is quite impossible,' and Mrs. Harcourt said this regretfully.

When the guests had left, Canon Leigh returned to the drawing-room. He was in high good-humour. He came up to his wife, who was standing by the fireplace, and put his arm round her. 'Where is Joan, love?'

Silence raised her tired eyes to her husband's face. 'She has gone to speak to Prescott; she will be here directly. Has everything gone as you wished, Heath?'

'I should think so! Why, the Harcourts have

been telling me that they have never enjoyed an evening more, and I am sure that nice little body, Mrs. Ramsay, would endorse that. Didn't I tell you, love, that we should manage all right? Warren cooked the dinner to perfection, and the maids waited as well as possible.'

'Oh, not Charlotte. I had to signal to her twice to hand the vegetables, and she never would remember to change the plates.'

'Tut, who would have noticed such a trifle! I am sure Prescott did her part well. What a pleasant fellow Trafford is! He kept us all lively with his racy stories. Well, my dear, I can only tell you that I can honestly congratulate you on the success of your first dinner-party.' But Silence's pale face did not brighten.

'You must thank Joan for that. Of course,' she added hastily, 'I shall know better how to manage next time. But I do not deserve any praise this evening. I am afraid that Canon Harcourt thought me a very stupid hostess.'

'My dear Silence!'

'Oh, you know'—and her voice was full of pain—'I am not clever like Joan, and I cannot talk. And yet I tried my very best to-night.'

'Do you think I do not know that?'

'But it was no use. What is the good of trying to hide the truth? I am not clever, Heath, and every day I live I seem to feel my ignorance more. If we did not love each other so much, I should often tell myself and you that I am not the right wife for you.' And then in a half-whisper—'Sometimes I fear that one day you will find it out for yourself.'

Heath was very angry for a moment. 'You would not say such a thing to me a second time!' he

returned, in a voice she had never heard before. Then, at the sight of her weary, anxious face he relented. 'You do not deserve me to tell you, what you already know to be the truth, that, clever or stupid, wise or ignorant, you are the one woman in the world for me.' Then Silence's beautiful eyes filled with tears.

'Please forgive me, dear. I was only thinking of my own deficiencies—I did not mean to hurt you.'

'Then I will try to forget it. But you must never say such a thing again, even to yourself. Hush, here comes Joan, and I am going to dismiss you to bed.' And Silence gladly availed herself of this permission to retire.

'Silence is very tired—I don't want her to have any more talking,' he said, as Joan came towards him.

'She has been tired all day,' returned the girl. 'I am afraid she did not enjoy the evening as much as we did. But I think social functions will never be in Silence's line.'

'Oh, it is always difficult to get out of a groove,' returned her brother quietly. 'And at the Rectory we were uncommonly groovy. Mothers' Meetings and Sunday School Treats were our chief dissipations. Smuts and smoke, instead of chiffon and pink tulips—eh, Joan?' And then, with a few words of grateful appreciation of the trouble she had taken, Heath made some excuse and retired to his study.

Nearly an hour later, when he went upstairs, he was surprised to see a light burning in his wife's room.

Silence was sitting at her little table reading. The book, Thomas à Kempis, lay open on her lap. She had taken off her dinner-dress and was in a white wrapper, and her dark hair was divided for the night in two long thick plaits which reached to her

knees. Joan, who had seen her once like this, told Heath that she had reminded her of a picture of the Madonna which she had greatly admired. 'It is the one with the plaits of hair on either side of the face—I forget the name of the artist—and it is very sweet, and with such a motherly expression.' Heath remembered this speech when Silence looked at him with a quiet smile.

'Do you know how late it is, love?' he asked reproachfully.

'Is it? I forgot the time; and this dear old book always rests me so. Do you remember it, Heath?' handing him the worn copy. 'It was your first present to me, and when you laid it down beside me and told me you were going away for a few weeks, I could not speak, partly for the pain of missing you, and because I saw how much you cared.'

Heath smiled. He remembered all about it. Then he glanced at the passage, a little amused.

It is a hard matter to leave off that to which we are accustomed, but it is harder to go against our own wills.

But if thou dost not overcome little and easy things, how wilt thou overcome harder things? . . .

O if thou didst but consider how much inward peace unto thyself, and joy unto others, thou shouldst procure by demeaning thyself well, I suppose thou wouldest be more careful of thy spiritual progress.

'That was the lesson I needed to-night,' said Silence gently. 'If you are not tired, Heath, will you sit down beside me for a few minutes?'

'Am I ever too tired to talk to you, dearest?'

'No, you are always so kind and patient. But I think you could help me a little if you would. But first I want to tell you how glad, how truly glad I am

that our little party has gone off so well. I did not say this properly before, and I know I disappointed you.'

Heath took his wife's hand and kissed it.

'That is spoken like my true-hearted Silence.'

'No, you must not praise me,' she returned, 'for I have not been good to-night, and I know how much I tried you. I have been trying to find out why I said such a strange thing to you, but I know now that my heart was full of bitterness because I was so jealous of Joan.'

'Jealous of that child!' he exclaimed indignantly.

'Joan is not a child, and she is very clever. You must be my father confessor to-night, and let me tell you what was troubling me. I think, if I could make you understand, that I should feel happier about things.'

Then he pressed her hand without speaking, for he began to see what was needed. When she had purged her mind of the perilous stuff, she would take a more sane and healthy view of her difficulties.

'It was during dinner,' she went on. 'Canon Harcourt was talking about that new book—the one you have been reading lately.' And as Heath nodded—'But I told him I had not read it. And then he changed the subject rather abruptly. But later on I could hear him discussing it with Joan, and she seemed so interested and eager about it, and talked so cleverly, that I could see he was quite delighted. They renewed the conversation in the drawing-room, and Mr. Trafford and Canon Ramsay joined them.'

'Well, my dear?'

'I was trying to talk to Mrs. Harcourt, but even she was listening to the others. She said it amused

her to hear Miss Leigh argue with her husband. And oh, Heath, I am ashamed to say it, but I know I envied Joan! I had the same old bad feelings that I used to have when I sat in the study of an evening and listened to you two talking about things I knew nothing about. I pretended not to care, but I often cried when I got upstairs for sheer mortification. I used to long to get rid of her because she always put me in the shade and I could never get you to myself.'

'You knew it was wrong to indulge in such feelings,' he said quietly.

'Oh yes, and I used to fight against them with all my strength. But this evening I had such a hopeless, unhappy feeling. You are such a clever man, dearest, and people seem to think so much of you. But you know what my education has been. Why, even Jessica at nine years old knows nearly as much as I do. When the children ask me questions I am obliged to tell them I do not know—that my mother took me away from school before I was fifteen, because she and father could not part with me any longer.'

'But that was no fault of yours, dearest.'

'No, it was my misfortune; and it is yours too —for if you rise in the world, how am I to fit myself for any high position?'

'By being simply yourself,' he returned calmly —'your own dear sensible self. No, it is my turn to talk now. You have nothing to tell me which I do not know. What is the use of crying over spilt milk? It is too late for you to go to school again.'

'But you once told me I ought to read more.' Then Heath gave an odd little laugh.

'Yes, I remember. But I soon took the books and

put them back on the shelves, when you told me they made your head ache. Try to look at the matter in a sensible light. The world of books will never be your world, Silence. We might as well try to fit a round thing into a square hole—the thing is impossible. You will never be a bookworm or a society woman, but you have your own place in the universe. To fill it wisely and happily, you must first recognise your limitations. You can't go through daily life comfortably if you are always trying to walk on tiptoe. And as for envying the gifts of others——' he stopped, and his manner became impressive even to sternness. 'Envy and jealousy are the devil's brood ; never parley with evil things even for a moment. If we are to love our neighbour as ourself, as my dearest mother taught me, we can hardly do it properly if we are coveting our neighbour's gifts, or grudging him his poor little social successes, or wishing him twenty miles away because his presence casts us in the shade.'

'I think I see what you mean, Heath—it is a sin against charity.'

'Yes, and not a venial one either, for it robs the soul of its peace. As for Joan, she is far more likely to envy you. Joan has no husband to tell her that she is the one woman in the world to him ; no children to think there is no one like mother. O faithless woman, are you not ashamed of yourself by this time?'

'Indeed I am, Heath. But you have helped me so much, and I hope never to be so naughty again. Why, you have preached me quite a sermon!'

'Yes, and my text was from Thomas à Kempis. Shall I sum up the three heads briefly?

'1st, Recognise your limitations.

'2ndly, Strangle evil in its infancy, before it grows strong and strangles you.

'3rdly, Be content with your place in the universe.'

Silence's only answer to this was one of those rare sweet kisses of hers which told him all he wanted to know.

CHAPTER XXI

'ANOTHER LETTER FROM LADY MARY'

Pain, that to us mortals clings,
Is but the pushing of our wings
That we have no use for yet,
And the uprooting of our feet
From the soil where they are set,
And the land we reckon sweet.
JEAN INGELOW.

Solitude sometimes is best society.—MILTON.

SILENCE'S naïve and childlike confession of her ignorance had touched her husband profoundly. And as he went to his dressing-room he felt he had never loved and reverenced her more. He was fully aware of her deficiencies, and all their married life he had tried to shield and help her in every possible way.

'What does it matter, after all,' he said to himself, 'that her smattering of education and imperfect knowledge make her feel shy and tongue-tied in general society? When I think of her beautiful nature and noble simplicity, I would not change her for the cleverest wife in Christendom. She is so absolutely truthful. It is I who am not worthy of her!'

Canon Leigh had always supervised his children's education. Silence had given her little girls a few

simple lessons. But even in those early days at the Rectory their father had instructed them in elementary Latin and French. 'I have taught all my children to read and write,' Silence said once to Joan, 'but I think Heath did the rest.'

Wanda had attended a day-school for a year or two; but as soon as they had settled down at St. Breda's Lodge an excellent governess, who had completed her education in Paris and Dresden, was engaged for the mornings. Jessica's idleness and pertness no longer tried her mother's patience. Miss Locke, who was firm yet gentle, knew how to enforce discipline, and few complaints reached her father's ear. 'I always know my lessons perfectly now, mummie,' Jess remarked once; 'but Miss Locke makes them so interesting, and then she always answers my questions.'

'That must be very nice, darling,' returned Silence gently. But when Jess had run off, she sighed rather heavily. There are plenty of thorns as well as flowers in the valley of humiliation, as Silence well knew. Joan, who had overheard the child's speech, looked up from her writing.

'I am afraid I am like Jess,' she said quaintly, 'I want all my questions answered. But I doubt if I shall ever find a teacher wise enough to satisfy me—I shall have to wait until I get hold of my Guardian Angel.' But this remark rather perplexed Silence.

They saw a good deal of Richard Trafford at St. Breda's Lodge. One of Dick's favourite sayings was—'You must always believe a man means what he says until he tells you a direct lie—after that you may form your own conclusions.' So when Canon Leigh told him that there would always be a welcome at St. Breda's Lodge, Dick took him at his word.

He and Dagon were constant visitors. Dick liked to stroll across between four and five. The informal family tea in school-room or dining-room pleased him mightily. 'It is so much more satisfactory than my Aunt Felicia's slop, dawdle, and gossip,' he said once to Joan. 'I hate little spindle-legged tables for one's cup and plate; there is danger of upsetting them when one jumps up to wait on the old ladies.' But Joan pretended to be shocked at this flippant remark.

'I am afraid it is your masculine selfishness,' she returned rather severely. 'You do not like the trouble of handing hot cakes and making yourself agreeable. If the truth were known, you think the old ladies should wait on you!'

'Oh, we shall come to that presently,' replied Dick with a twinkle. 'The old order changeth. When lovely woman stoops to folly, you know—joins hatless brigades, and plays football and bridge—she has to step down from her pedestal. In the days of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers—delightfully feminine creatures, in spite of their coal-scuttle bonnets and narrow skirts—there were none of these little games. The dear charmers put on their spencers—oh, you see I am up in the dress of the Georgian age—armed themselves with huge muffs and walking-sticks, and sallied forth to enjoy the air, and a dish of tea with their cronies. Don't you see their mincing steps and the ostrich plumes waving in the wintry air, and the satin reticules dangling at their wrists?'

'Oh, how ridiculous you are!' but it was evident that Joan was well amused. But Dick's next question startled her.

'Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Leigh?'

'No—yes—oh, I don't know! But if any one told

me a room was haunted, nothing would induce me to sleep in it.'

'Agnostic and illogical—well, well, we must have patience with the weaker vessel! I am not going to raise any psychological questions; I am only imagining the astonishment of my great-grandmother, if that venerable and long-deceased gentlewoman were permitted to revist the haunts of her youth. Would she know her London, do you suppose, with its motors and taxi-cabs, tubes, and underground railways? And what do you think would surprise her most?' But Joan was quite equal to the occasion.

'The twentieth-century young lady,' she answered promptly.

'That's so,' returned Dick; 'you may go up one, Miss Leigh. But I will draw a veil over the feelings of the dear departed. She would go back to her circle a wiser and a sadder woman.' Then, with a sudden transition of ideas—'Are you aware that it has just chimed the half-hour, and that my fancy is conjuring up the fragrance of hot tea, alarmingly sweetened, and piles of cotton-wool toast cut thick, insufficiently toasted, and swimming in butter?'

Joan laughed. 'Oh, how absurd you are! Yes, my sister-in-law is out, and we are going to have a school-room tea this evening. The children have made their father promise to join them.'

'Lead on, good fairy, I am in luck's way!' replied Dick blandly. He had met Joan returning from the town, and for the last quarter of an hour they had been pacing up and down the cloisters. Joan always looked more cheerful when she was listening to Dick's nonsense. He seemed to bring with him a whiff of Brantwood air. He never paid her compliments, but there was a

pleasant sense of *camaraderie* that gave them mutual pleasure.

The hour that followed Dick's entrance into the school-room was usually full of enjoyment. Wanda always presided at the tea-tray on these occasions, and Dick sat beside her and took the sugar-bowl under his supervision, and Jess and Noel brought in the cotton-wool toast, over which they had scorched their faces.

'Warren says this is the very very last time, father,' observed Jess in an injured tone, 'and that she can't be fashed with such doings in her kitchen after the spring clean, so we must content ourselves with bread and butter and cake. Don't take that black bit, Mr. Trafford—Noel has burnt it. Here is a nice soft cotton-wool bit.' Then Dick helped himself with a resigned air.

'We dine at half-past seven, but I think if I walked up and down the Green for an hour I might manage to pick up an appetite.' But, as Jess carried off the plate, he surreptitiously conveyed the dainty to Dagon, who always kept close to his master's chair at tea-time.

Happily, Jess did not notice this. 'When are you going to play croquet with us, Mr. Trafford?' she asked suddenly; 'you and Wanda have never given Aunt Joan and me our revenge.'

'Shall we say to-morrow?' returned Dick. But he looked at the demure little tea-maker as he spoke.

'We have lessons in the morning,' observed Wanda, 'and except on Saturday I do not think Jess and I can play until after tea. May we say to-morrow, father?' But before Canon Leigh could answer, Dick interposed in his airy fashion.

'We will consider it settled then, Miss Wanda.

There is no need to call in the dignitaries of the Church to settle these trifling affairs, as too much familiarity breeds contempt. I will partake of Kenwyn tea and toast and join you on the lawn.' And so it was arranged.

Dick played all games well. He always chose Wanda for his partner. Jess would complain of this sometimes. 'You always beat us; I don't think we are fairly matched,' she would say. 'Wanda plays better than I do, so I ought to be your partner.' But Dick did not seem to see this.

Silence seldom played unless she were alone with her children. She liked better to watch her husband and Joan. More than once, when Dick Trafford came up to wish her good-night, with his brown, handsome face flushed with exercise, the thought crossed her mind —If only Joan had cared for him, how much happier it would have been for every one! 'They are such good friends, and seem to have so much in common,' she thought. But she would have been surprised if she had known that such an idea had never seriously entered Dick's head.

Joan's cheerfulness was due to more than one cause. The idea of those weeks at Folkestone had greatly raised her spirits.

'I must not build upon it too much,' she would say to herself, 'for, of course, something may come to prevent it.' But all the same Joan was grievously disappointed when her pleasant little castle in the air was dashed to the ground.

'Another letter from Lady Mary,' observed Canon Leigh in surprise one morning as he caught sight of the handwriting. 'Why, you only heard from her yesterday, my dear'—as Joan, with rather a perturbed expression,

carried off her letter to the window. Before she opened the envelope she was sure that it contained no good news.

'Oh, my dearest child,' wrote Lady Mary, 'we had such a harassing day yesterday. Dorothy came down to me before I had finished breakfast. They had had such bad news of Josselyn. That young doctor—Dr. Hallett, I think is his name—had written to his father. Poor dear Josselyn had broken a blood-vessel; he had done something imprudent, and severe hæmorrhage had set in. Happily Dr. Hallett was on the spot, and the proper remedies were at once applied. Josselyn was slightly better when Dr. Hallett wrote. My brother read to her the concluding passages of his letter.

'"I do not think it right to conceal from your lordship that your son is in a very critical condition, and if there should be a return of the hæmorrhage, that one could not answer for the consequences. We have been fortunate in securing the services of an excellent English nurse, Sister Rose of Guy's. She was staying at the hotel with a sister and at once undertook the case. She has promised to stay until Lord Josselyn is out of danger, so you may rest assured that he has every care and attention."

'My poor brother is terribly cut up, Joan, and Lady Merriton looks as ill as possible. Of course they are going off to Josselyn at once, and Dorothy will accompany them. They had just sent for Craig and were expecting him every moment, but they have no hope that he will be able to leave at present, as the manœuvres begin on Thursday. By the time this letter reaches you they will be well on their way. Oh, dear Joan, what a world of trouble this is! Of course our pleasant little Folkestone scheme is in abeyance. I must stay at Morningside and be ready for Craig if he wants me. I am sending you their address in case you would like to write to Dorothy. It was a blessing that Cicely O'Brien had just left, for she would have been sadly in the way just now.' And then with a few loving words Lady Mary concluded her letter.

Canon Leigh looked at Joan rather anxiously as

she handed the letter to him. The girl's face looked quite pale and drawn.

'You had better read it for yourself,' she said. 'They are in trouble at the Abbey; Lord Josselyn is very ill. No, I have finished my breakfast,' as Silence mutely pointed to her plate; 'I am going out.' Heath read the letter to his wife.

'I am afraid it is a bad business,' he said gravely; 'Lord Josselyn is always doing something foolish, and I am afraid he has done it once too often, poor reckless fellow! Joan seems to take it to heart; but then she and Lady Dorothy are like sisters.'

'Yes,' returned Silence in a low voice, 'and she knows that his brother's death would only make it still more impossible for her to marry Captain Bastow.'

'You seem to be quite sure in your own mind that Joan cares for him,' observed Heath.

'Oh yes, I am quite sure of that,' she replied simply, as she took up her tea-caddy and key-basket and went off to give orders, leaving her husband still ruminating over Lady Mary's letter.

The bells were not yet ringing for morning service when Joan entered the Cathedral, but she had no intention of attending matins. She sought out her favourite verger and asked him to unlock the door leading to the crypt. How still and solemn and silent it was in the morning light! Here and there a shaft of sunlight from one of the deeply-set windows slanted between the Norman pillars.

Joan went straight to her favourite little chapel and sat down on a bench in a dim corner. Overhead they would soon be chanting matins. Silence would be in her usual place, with Mrs. Ramsay's peaceful face in the opposite choir stall. But Joan had no intention

of joining them. Her heart was too heavy to bear the sound of the pealing organ and fresh boys' voices. Her corner in the quiet little chapel suited her far better. She was safe from intrusion for the present. No curious sight-seers would be wandering in all directions until recalled by a garrulous verger. Here she could sit and think, or kneel and offer up pitiful, disconnected little petitions for poor Josselyn and his unhappy parents, for Craig and herself.

Poor Joan, she had never been more unhappy. 'One must always hope,' she had written; but it seemed to her, in that dark hour, that hope had died a natural death.

'Josselyn will die,' she said to herself; 'he is practically dying now. And then Craig will be lost to me. Oh, my darling, and I love and miss you more every day!' And bitter tears of self-pity and yearning rose to the girl's eyes. How real—how terribly intense are the sorrows of youth! All her life long Joan would never quite forget those hours in St. Breda's crypt, when Hope shook his rainbow-tinted wings and prepared for flight. Since the days of Eve, how many of her daughters have had with their own weak hands to shut themselves out of their Eden! The angels that stand sentinel there, and who sternly forbid return, are known by many names—Duty, Right, Self-sacrifice—but each one bears a flaming sword.

'He will not come now—he dare not,' she said to herself. 'And yet, if I could see him once and hear his voice again. But it would not be right, and he will not do it. If I could only be with my dear Lady Mary,' she thought presently, 'I could bear things better.' And as fresh tears coursed down her cheeks,

the quaint, sweet verse Lady Mary had quoted to her came to her recollection :

> What if to-morrow's cares were here
> Without its rest ?
> I'd rather He'd unlocked the day,
> And as its hours swung open say,
> 'My will is best.'

'Shall I ever be able to say that really ?' thought Joan.

CHAPTER XXII

FROM THE HÔTEL DE MONTAGNE

To forget is not to be restored ;
To lose with time the sense of what we did
Cancels not what we did ; what's done remains.
CLOUGH.

Of true contrition and humbling of the heart ariseth hope of forgiveness.—THOMAS À KEMPIS.

JOAN was so unapproachable that day that, though Silence's good, womanly heart was full of sympathy for the girl's evident unhappiness, she did not venture to express it. Joan shut herself up in her room and wrote a long letter to Lady Mary and a shorter one to Dorothy, and she posted them herself.

When Dick Trafford strolled across to St. Breda's Lodge after tea, Wanda told him that Aunt Joan had gone for a long walk. As usual, Jess put in her word. 'Aunt Joan said she was tired and did not want to talk or play games. She has been quite glum all day, hasn't she, Wanda? Mummie will have to take her place. If you ask her very nicely, Mr. Trafford, I am sure she will not refuse.' And as Dick's embassage was successful, Joan found the game in full swing when she returned from her walk.

She had tired herself into that state of non-thinking passivity which is like a lull after a storm. But, as she stood watching the final contest, Dick's keen glance noticed her weary listlessness and want of animation. 'There is something very much amiss,' he said to himself, 'she looks a bit bowled over.' And then it struck him how much of Joan's charm lay in her sunny, vivacious expression and lightsome, débonnaire flow of spirits.

'She is picturesque and taking, but she is not the least pretty,' he went on; 'she cannot hold a candle to her beautiful little niece.' And here Dick gave a final hit to his ball which finished the game and covered himself and his partner with glory.

'You and Wanda have won as usual,' observed Jess in an injured voice. 'I knew there was no chance with mummie, and I am so tired of being always on the losing side.'

'I am in Miss Jessica's bad books, I see,' observed Dick. Then Wanda looked up at him a little beseechingly.

'Would you very much mind having Jess just once for your partner, Mr. Trafford? I know she does not play well, but she would be so happy to win one game.' And as Dick's good-nature could not resist this appeal, Jess's discontent soon changed into rapture.

She woke Noel up for the purpose of telling him the good news. 'I am to be Mr. Trafford's partner to-morrow—isn't that lovely!'

'Don't know anything about it,' returned the little boy drowsily. 'Good-night, Bill; shut the door.' And Jess flounced off to find another, more sympathising auditor.

Joan pulled herself together the next day and

resumed her usual habits, though she was so grave and silent that Canon Leigh more than once debated with himself whether he should speak to her; but her manner deterred him, and Silence advised him to leave her alone.

'When people are in suspense, they are often too much on edge to bear any talk. I should not try to force her confidence, Heath; one can see how terribly worried she is.' And Canon Leigh took his wife's advice, and contented himself with asking Joan if her letter from Lady Mary contained any fresh news of the invalid, and Joan would give him some brief answer.

'There was a slight improvement, Dr. Hallett thought, but they were not to build on it. Lord Josselyn was unable to talk, but he had seemed pleased to see his parents and Dorothy.' Such were the items of news that Joan extracted from her daily letter from Brantwood. And so it went on for the next few days. Lady Mary's letters were short, for she had little to narrate. Craig was at the manœuvres, and she had only seen him once. He had looked tired and depressed. He had dined with her, and they had had a good deal of talk. One sentence in Lady Mary's letter had given Joan secret satisfaction.

I am afraid the O'Brien scheme is not making much progress. I asked after Lady Cicely, but Craig did not seem to know anything about her. 'I expect Dorothy keeps up a correspondence with her'; but he said this so carelessly, as though the subject did not interest him. Poor Lady Merriton, how disappointed she must be!

Joan's cheeks glowed as she read this. She wanted to kiss Lady Mary for giving her that little bit of comfort. Then she took herself severely to task. What did she mean by being so selfish? Would it not be the

best and happiest thing in the world for Craig if he could only care enough for that sweet Lady Cicely? No one could make him a better wife. Oh, if I were only not in his way!' thought Joan remorsefully; 'I am just a stumbling-block to them all.'

A few days later Lady Mary's letter contained one from her niece. 'I thought Dorothy's letter would interest you,' she wrote, 'and she has no time to write to us both. You can return it in your next.' And Joan carried it off to read at her leisure, in a certain quiet nook in the kitchen garden which she much affected. There was a rustic seat and table under a gnarled old apple tree, and when she sat there a robin was generally in attendance. It was a quiet little corner, so shut in with lilac and syringa bushes that any one sitting there was quite hidden. Canon Leigh often took possession of it when he was studying the subject for his next sermon.

Lady Dorothy's handwriting was beautiful. It was as clear and legible as print, and Lady Mary would sometimes remark that it was quite an accomplishment. 'I can read Dollie's letters without the aid of my lorgnette,' she would observe.

'At last I have leisure for a proper letter, dearest Aunt Mary,' wrote Lady Dorothy, 'after those scrappy notes which I scribbled off so hurriedly. But you know poor dear mother was so ill during the journey, with all the suspense and anxiety, and not knowing what news might await us, that we were all quite troubled about her—indeed, I never saw father in such a state. How I wished Craig could have been with us.

'Dr. Hallett was at the station to meet us, and his report was better than we dared to expect. Arthur was no worse—but I think I have told you this before, though my bulletins were too brief for any details. We are all so pleased with

Dr. Hallett. Mother is especially taken with him. As we drove to the hotel, he gave us the fullest account of poor dear Arthur's illness. He had disobeyed his doctor's orders, and declaring that he was quite fit for the exertion, he actually did a little bit of climbing. There was some view he wanted to see; the climb was trifling—not many hundred yards—but before he had accomplished half the distance he was in such a state they could scarcely get him back to the hotel. Happily Dr. Hallett was on the spot, or he would not have been alive now. It was the most reckless imprudence, and even his friends tried to dissuade him; but you know Arthur's obstinacy when he is set on a thing. Dr. Hallett told us that he could not allow us to see him that night, as the excitement might give him a bad night; but he promised that we should see him in the morning, and that he would give us the latest account before we retired to rest. I never saw any one so kind and thoughtful.

'The Hôtel de Montagne is not so full as usual just now, and we have quite a delightful suite of rooms. They are in the same corridor as Arthur's—so quiet, and with such lovely views from the balcony. But no one except father had time to take much notice of our environment, for mother was so worn out that Justine and I had to help her to bed. Later on in the evening, as I was sitting with mother, there was a knock at the door and Sister Rose came in. Dr. Hallett had sent her, she said, to see if there was anything she could do for our comfort. She said her patient was inclined to sleep. He had no idea his people had arrived, though she fancied from something he had said that he was expecting us. Mother made her sit down and talk to us. Oh, dear Aunt Mary, she is one of the sweetest women I ever saw, and we have all fallen in love with her. Dr. Hallett told us about her the next day. She is a Mountjoy. Her father belongs to the younger branch of the family, and they were so poor. Then she married a certain Captain Osborne in the Hussars, and about a year afterwards he was killed in a frontier war, and the poor young widow was left with very little to maintain her. A child, a boy, was born about three months after her husband's death, but he only lived six weeks.

As soon as she had recovered from this second shock, Sister Rose refused to stay at home and be a burden to her father, and determined to devote herself to nursing.

'You should have heard Dr. Hallett's enthusiastic praises! He declared that she had a perfect genius for nursing—that her touch and voice always seemed to soothe her patient. "Nursing is with her a labour of love," he observed. "When the invalid needs her she never seems to consider herself at all. Her sister, Mrs. Wetherell, told me this," he went on, "and begged that I would exert my authority as a medical man and induce her to take needful rest. 'She has had a great deal of hard work,' she continued, 'and has come abroad for a month's holiday, and now Lord Josselyn's unfortunate illness will spoil her trip.' Of course, when Mrs. Wetherell said this, I offered to set her free, but Sister Rose would not listen to either of us; and I think, Lady Merriton, that we cannot be too thankful that Lord Josselyn has such a devoted and skilful nurse."

'In spite of all this kindness and comfort, I don't think we any of us slept much that night, and after breakfast father was in such a restless, irritable condition that he went out for a little stroll. But he was only just out of sight when Dr. Hallett came to take us to Arthur's room. He seemed rather glad father had gone out, and said that it would be better for him to see his son later on; and then he told mother that she must be as quiet and calm as possible, as his patient was very weak and must not talk.

'Oh, dear Aunt Mary, all Dr. Hallett's kindly warnings had not prepared me for the shock of Arthur's changed appearance. He looked so shrunken and ghastly that I could not check my tears! But, would you believe it, mother was so beautifully calm. She just went up and kissed him. "My darling boy," she said, "Dollie and I have come to see you, and your father will be here presently. No, you must not talk—you are far too weak—but I shall love to sit by you and look at you." It was just mother's nursery voice—you know what I mean. I really think for the moment that she fancied Arthur was a little boy again.

'Poor fellow, he seemed quite touched, and I am sure that

he was pleased to see us. I heard him say in a sort of whisper, so that Sister Rose should not hear him, "that he was not worth all this kindness." But mother only kissed his hand and told him that he must be good and lie still, or we should not be allowed to stay.

'I crept away soon after this, but mother remained there for nearly an hour. Oh, Justine has come to interrupt me. Mother wants me, she says, so I must leave off for the present, but I shall hope to finish before post time.

'3 P.M.—At last I have a quiet half-hour to complete my letter, so I will go on with my narrative. I know I shall not weary you, dear, for you are just one of us, and all our troubles are yours. As soon as Arthur had had some rest, Sister Rose came to fetch father. Mother went with him. Arthur seemed far more agitated when father spoke to him than he had been with us.

'"I am not worth all this trouble, father," he said in his poor husky voice. And a moment later—"I have been nothing but a disappointment to you and my mother all my life, and it is my own fault that I am lying here now. If I die it will be better for you all." It was Sister Rose who told me this. She said poor father was so distressed that he could not speak. But mother said quietly, "You must not upset your father, Arthur; you do not mean to pain us, my dear. We can remember nothing now but that our boy is suffering and needs our love. 'Like as a father pitieth his children'—oh, you know the rest, my darling." Sister Rose said there was something so touching and beautiful in the way mother said this that she could hardly refrain from tears.

'"We had to get Lord Merriton away after that," she went on. "But Lord Josselyn would not allow his mother to go. I have left them together—he has just fallen asleep holding her hand. 'As one whom his mother comforteth'—Lady Dorothy, these words have been haunting me all the morning." There was such a sweet smile on Sister Rose's face as she said that.

'Since that first day mother has been almost constantly in the sick-room. She takes no part in the nursing, of course, but she sits quietly by the bed where Arthur can see her—

pretending to work or read. As she gives no trouble and her presence seems to soothe Arthur, Dr. Hallett makes no objection to this. Father and I only go in every night and morning. But we never stay long. In some strange way, father's visits seem to disturb Arthur. Now and then he says a word about his father's looks. "He seems aged somehow," he observed once; "he never used to have those wrinkles, and he has grown so grey." Poor mother hardly knew how to answer him. "Your father has had so much trouble, Arthur. I do not think he has ever got over the loss of Archie and Clyde. And now this fresh anxiety." But Arthur interrupted her. "It is I who am my father's worst trouble," he groaned, "though you are too kind to tell me so, mother."

'Dear Aunt Mary, we are all so thankful to see real evidence of penitence and right feeling on Arthur's part. An old clergyman, Canon Morse, has just arrived at the hotel with his daughter. Mother knows him very well by name. He is a very saintly old man, and has done a wonderful work as a missioner. She is going to ask him to see Arthur. I am not sure that Dr. Hallett quite approves—he is so afraid of any excitement—but when mother said she was certain it would be a comfort to Arthur, he could not withhold his consent. As we find Sister Rose knows Canon Morse well, there will be no difficulty about an introduction. She will speak to him after *table d'hôte*. Now, I really must conclude.—With love from us all, your devoted niece,

DOROTHY.'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COMING OF AZRAEL

Pray for me, O my friends! a Visitant
Is knocking his dire summons at my door,
The like of whom to scare me and to daunt
Has never, never come to me before!
'Tis Death—O loving friends! your prayers!
'Tis He!

NEWMAN.

JOAN expressed so much gratitude for Lady Mary's thoughtfulness in allowing her to read Lady Dorothy's letter that her kind friend in future made copious extracts from her niece's letters before she sent them on to Craig.

'Dolly is a famous correspondent,' she wrote once; 'she always tells me what I most want to know. She writes so naturally, and yet so clearly, that we can realise things as though we were there.'

One of these extracts was full of Canon Morse's visits to Lord Josselyn.

Of course Arthur sees him alone. Sister Rose always remains in the outer room, just out of earshot, so no one knows exactly what passes between them. Arthur is so extremely reticent that he does not even speak of them to mother, but she is quite sure that the visits give him comfort. He said once that Canon Morse was a wonderful man, and that he

wished that he had come across him before. Mother thinks that he is quietly getting an influence over him, and there is always a calmer look on Arthur's face after one of these short interviews.

Canon Morse is really splendid with father also. He takes him out for walks and tries to interest him. His daughter, too, is an extremely nice woman, though she is rather an invalid. They are devoted to each other, and it is beautiful to see them together. There is something so venerable and apostolic about the dear old man. I told Dr. Hallett that he reminded me of St. John in Patmos, but he only smiled in an inscrutable way. Sister Rose told me afterwards that she feared that, with all his cleverness and kindness, he had not much sense of religion. But, all the same, he seems to respect Canon Morse and to defer to his opinion quite nicely. You will see by all this that things are going on tolerably smoothly. I am afraid Arthur is no stronger, though he seems less depressed. He talks very little, but he likes father to read the paper to him when he is able to bear it, and he remembers people and asks after them quite kindly. Will you tell Joan when you write to her that he was speaking of her yesterday? I am sure she will be pleased to hear that. He called her the jolly little red-haired girl—just in his old teasing way. Joan will recollect how angry I used to get when Arthur said this, and I used to argue that her hair was auburn or ruddy brown, not red. He was asking after Marjorie Colvin the other day, and seemed surprised that she was not married. And then he looked at mother. 'If I had taken your advice, madre, she would have been Lady Josselyn now; but I was a bad boy and did not seem to see it.' And a few minutes later he said such a strange thing. 'Tell Craig from me that he could not do better than marry the little O'Brien girl—what's her name? I seem to forget everything now.' Then, as I reminded him—'Oh yes, Lady Cicely—a pretty little brunette. I admire her more than her cousin—got more go and animation about her. Lady Marjorie is a bit heavy in hand. Tell old Craig that I hope he will be a better boy than I was, and give him my love.' There was such a pained look on mother's face when he said this. 'Dollie, my dear, you must not

let Arthur talk so much or we shall get into disgrace with Sister Rose,' she observed as quietly as possible. But something in her voice made Arthur give her such a curious intent look. 'Poor mother,' I heard him say under his breath, and I am almost sure there were tears in his eyes.

Joan was reading this letter at the breakfast-table, and as she laid it down she addressed her brother quite cheerfully.

'Heath, do you know, the accounts of Lord Josselyn are really better to-day. Dorothy seems quite in good spirits. I begin to think that he will not die after all, and that Lady Merriton will have her wish granted to have him at the Abbey again.'

Canon Leigh looked at her rather dubiously.

'Do you think we ought to wish that, Joan? Lord Josselyn will always be an invalid.'

'Oh, but he would have time to make up to his parents for some of the pain he has caused them,' returned Joan eagerly. 'All these years Lady Merriton has longed and fretted after him, and now she seems to have got him again, and Dorothy says she is so happy.'

'I see what you mean,' returned Heath slowly; 'but I have had a great to do with similar cases, and I cannot advise you to build on any temporary improvement. Very often when it is least expected there is a sudden return of the mischief.' And though Joan refused to be disheartened, and clung to her belief, Canon Leigh proved a true prophet.

Three days later there was a black-edged envelope on Joan's plate, with a brief note from Lady Mary.

'The end has come,' she wrote hurriedly. 'My brother has just sent me a telegram: "Josselyn died this morning—return of hæmorrhage, quite sudden; will write." Craig had

one too; he is going to them at once. I know no particulars, but of course they will bring the poor dear boy home. I must write to my brother and Lady Merriton, so I have no time for more.'

Later in the day, as Joan was trying to combat her restlessness by helping Silence with a frock for Jessica which she was anxious to finish, Silence said suddenly:

'Do you really think that they will bring Lord Josselyn to England?'

'I have not a doubt of it,' returned Joan wearily. The girl's face was very pale and her eyes heavy, but her voice was quite calm. 'Lord Merriton would wish his eldest son to be buried in the family vault. Both his grandfather and great-grandfather were laid to rest in Kilverton churchyard.'

'Kilverton?' murmured Silence in surprise.

'Yes, Kilverton used to be the family place in the palmy days of the Merritons. Only for some reason—the unhealthiness of the situation probably, for the Hall was in a valley and was quite shut in by trees—Lord Merriton's father took such a dislike to it that he refused to live there. I believe two of the children died there from diphtheria; anyhow, neither he nor his wife would ever make it their home again.'

'I can quite understand that, Joan.'

'Oh, so can I. But, all the same, it does seem such a pity; it is such a picturesque, stately old house. Brantwood Abbey cannot compare with it. Lord Merriton told me one day, when he was showing me some beautiful photographs of the place, that it had been discovered that the Hall was built over an old, badly-drained swamp. It is certainly awfully damp, and a part is no longer habitable. But the Bastows,

with the exception of Clyde and Archie, are all buried in Kilverton churchyard. They have a huge vault there like a room, with stained-glass windows. But what Lady Mary likes best is a life-sized angel who seems to guard the entrance, with a scroll in his hand with "Resurgam" on it.'

'"I will arise"—oh yes, that was a beautiful thought.'

'Lady Mary once confessed to me that she would so love to be laid there. But of course the Boyles have a vault at Roskill, and she considers it her duty to lie with her husband. But she always seems to me to be more of a Bastow.'

'But surely she loved her husband, Joan?'

'Oh yes, she loved him, and I am quite sure that Sir Martin was devoted to her; but they did not marry very young. Anyhow'—and here Joan's work dropped from her fingers—'I am glad to think that they are bringing Lord Josselyn to Kilverton, and that the Angel of the Resurrection will be guarding him there. Forgive me, Silence, but I really cannot work any more. I think I will walk over to Nesselwood and ask after old Mrs. Atler; I shall just have time to go there and back before dinner.' Silence made no objection, and a few moments later her husband came into the room.

'Where is Joan, love? I was just going to ask her to have a stroll with me.'

'Oh, I am so sorry, Heath, but she has just started off for Nesselwood. She was too restless to work. Lord Josselyn's death seems to have upset her a good deal, though she once told me that she never cared for him.'

'No, she has said the same to me more than once; in fact, I believe she rather disliked him than otherwise. But I am afraid she is thinking of Captain Bastow. Of course this clinches the business.' Then

Silence looked up from her delicate smocking. There was rather an indignant light in her grey eyes.

'Oh, Heath, what a stupid world it is!'

'How do you mean?' he asked in an amused tone.

'Why should not people marry as they like and be happy? Do you mean to tell me that Joan, your sister, is not good enough for any Bastow? Why are they all setting themselves up against it and saying it is impossible. How can it be impossible if they love each other?'

'My dear love!' but it was evident that Canon Leigh was quite pleased by his wife's unusual vehemence.

'I am afraid Captain Bastow will find himself heavily handicapped,' he went on. 'Lady Mary told me the last time I was at Morningside that Lord Josselyn's extravagance had so impoverished the estate that it would be absolutely necessary for Captain Bastow to marry a girl with a fortune. And then she spoke of Lady Cicely O'Brien.'

'But if he does not care for her! Oh, Heath, don't you see how wrong and wicked it all is? And if he and Joan are really in love!'

'But are we sure of that? Of course I have my grave doubts on the subject. Joan is making a brave effort, but I see that she is unhappy. Still, many a girl has been disappointed in her first love and has in time got over it.'

'I cannot agree with you,' returned Silence quietly. 'And in my opinion Joan has been hardly used. She has been thrown almost daily into Captain Bastow's company; he has made love, and though she has very properly refused to listen to him, I fear her heart is no longer in her own keeping. With all her faults,

Joan has very deep affections, and she is not one to change. If Lady Mary and the Merritons had not been culpably blind, things would never have come to this pass.' And there was quite a severe look on the Madonna face as Silence delivered herself of this lengthy sentence. But Heath only smiled at her.

'I am afraid you are right, love,' he said, 'and that worldly ways are not always the wisest and happiest ways. But, after all, the matter is not in our hands.'

'No, that is true,' she returned gravely. 'But ever since Joan has been with us I have been thinking over things; and I have come to the conclusion that, if only the Merritons could be brought to see it, such a marriage ought not to be an impossibility. There, it is time to dress for dinner, so we must not talk any more.'

But when Silence had left the room, Canon Leigh sat still in his place, looking out at the ruined arch and evening sky. Something in his wife's words had gone as straight as an arrow to his conscience.

He knew himself to be an ambitious man—he had never been indifferent to the gifts and prizes of life—but he hoped his secret worldliness had been hidden from every one but his Maker. Silence, in her simplicity, never guessed it. In her eyes he was absolutely perfect. She gloried in his successes, not because she coveted such things for him, but because she saw that they added to his happiness. Nothing was too good for him, no honour too great, thought the fond wife.

But now a few indignant words had cast a sudden flashlight which seemed to illumine his secret thoughts. 'Do you mean to tell me that Joan, your sister, is not good enough for any Bastow?' Why

had he felt that proud thrill as Silence had said that? If it had been possible, would he not have gloried in such a marriage for his young sister?

'Worldly ways are not always the wisest and happiest ways,' he had told her. How easy to formulate such an axiom, and yet how difficult to live up to the spirit of it! Could any one be more worldly than he, an ordained servant of God! Where was his singleness of aim? Was he solely intent on his life's mission—to win souls, and bind up the wounds of the broken-hearted, to pour in the oil of healing? or was he secretly set on being recognised in the diocese as a powerful and eloquent preacher, as an authority on ecclesiastical literature, whose talents and research should win a just praise?

'Mea culpa,' he groaned, and there was a shadow on the fine intellectual face. 'Who can understand his errors? cleanse Thou me from secret faults.'

CHAPTER XXIV

'CHARITY NEVER FAILETH'

Sweet Shepherd, not one is so far away,
But Thy voice to its ears must win;
And there'll be such joy in the fold that day,
When the last of Thy flock comes in!
HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

THREE days later Lady Mary forwarded another letter from the Hôtel de Montagne.

'I have very few particulars to give you, dearest Aunt Mary,' wrote Lady Dorothy. 'It was all so sudden that we are still quite dazed with the shock. I have just left mother with father sitting beside her; but as I feel I could not sleep, I am writing to you instead. Tired as I am, I know I could not close my eyes. I would rather tell you the little there is to know.

'That last evening—was it only yesterday or a year ago?—it was so peaceful and happy. We were all in Arthur's room. He seemed unwilling for any of us to leave him. Father read to him a little and then we talked, and Sister Rose joined us for a few minutes. Arthur looked quite bright; he seemed looking forward to his visit to Brantwood. "I suppose Hallett will give me my marching orders pretty soon," he said. "But I won't go without my kind nurse," looking at Sister Rose quite affectionately.

'"I have heard so much of Brantwood Abbey, Lord Josselyn, and it would be very nice to see it," she answered quietly,

for she would not damp him by telling him that she would have to go back to the Hospital. And then Arthur began making all sorts of plans. He wanted us to stay later with him than usual that night, because he felt so well. But Sister Rose would not hear of this. When I wished Arthur good-night, he made one of his teasing little speeches. "Dollie," he said, "I hope you don't mean to be an old maid. But I don't suppose they could spare you at home, you have always been such a good little girl"; and he gave my hand a loving squeeze. There, I have blotted the page, but you will understand.

'I went to bed in such good spirits, and slept more soundly than usual; and it seemed to me the middle of the night, though I believe it was only just before dawn, when there was a loud knock at my door. It opened, and father's voice said, "Arthur is very ill; there has been a return of the hæmorrhage. You had better get up at once." And I threw on my dressing-gown and was beside him before he had reached Arthur's room. Mother was there already.

'Oh, dearest Aunt Mary, shall I ever forget that moment! Dr. Hallett was holding a sponge to Arthur's mouth; he was conscious; there was recognition in his eyes, I am sure of it. The next moment Dr. Hallett bent over him. . . .

'I remember mother said something. She thought Arthur had fainted, and wanted them to give him more air. But Dr. Hallett shook his head.

'"My dear lady," he said, "there is nothing more to be done for your son." And then he signed to father to take her away. But I thought we never should have persuaded her to leave the room. You see, she could not believe that the poor boy was really dead.

'"It is not true, Merriton—it cannot be true," she kept saying over and over again, her poor hands shaking as though she had ague. It was so terrible for father.

'"Yes, Hildegarde, it is true; God has taken our boy, and we must try to submit to the Divine Will. We have still each other, and Craig will be good to us." And then, with such a sob—"Am I not better to thee than ten sons?"

'I saw mother creep closer to him when she heard that sob. They were so engrossed with each other that they

never noticed me; and I left them to comfort each other. Father came to me later and told me that she was calmer and more composed, and that Sister Rose was with her.

'Canon Morse had a little service in Arthur's room, and I think it did us all good; and he said such beautiful, helpful things to us afterwards. Sister Rose and Miss Morse had made the room so beautiful, and dear Arthur looked so peaceful, and years younger. I think it nearly broke mother's heart because they could not let her stay longer; but it was impossible—there was so much to do. We expect Craig will be here before eight, and we shall probably leave in the afternoon. We shall sleep one night at Grosvenor Square. Arthur is to be brought there. Mother has implored father to have this done, and, after all, it seems the best arrangement. We shall leave quite early the next morning for Kilverton. Father has asked Mr. Rutherford to take the service, as the vicar is a stranger to us. He begs that you will not think of undertaking the journey. We intend returning straight to Brantwood. There, I must lie down now and try and get some rest. Good-night—or rather good-morning, dear.—Your loving DOROTHY.'

'Of course I shall not be dissuaded from going down to Kilverton,' wrote Lady Mary. 'I have just written to Mrs. Baddeley and asked her to have a room ready for me. And of course Dunlop will accompany me. I shall be there to receive them, and to see that everything is arranged as they wished. Mrs. Baddeley will do her best, I know, but it will be far better for one of the family to be there. Ah, if you could only be with me, Joan! I think I miss you more every day, my dear.'

Joan sighed heavily as she read this. There was nothing she could do for them, except write loving little notes of sympathy to Lady Mary and Dorothy, and a message of condolence to the sorrowing parents.

Lady Mary's next letter gave her an account of the funeral.

'I was right to come,' she wrote. 'If you had only seen my brother's look of relief when he saw my face in the hall!

He is looking so much older, Joan, and so worn and thin. But Lady Merriton is wonderful. She seems to have nerved herself to go through it all—but I expect she will break down when it is over. Dollie is just her sweet little self, thinking of every one. They seemed very much pleased with the arrangements of the library. We had so many beautiful wreaths and crosses. I think Cicely O'Brien's was one of the best.

'Lord Templeton and Mr. Rutherford joined us at the station, and there were three or four of poor Josselyn's friends.

'It was such a beautiful day, and I think the old churchyard never looked more lovely. I am afraid I had a return of the old longing, Joan, when I caught sight of the Angel of the Resurrection. But, after all, what does it matter where I lay my old bones, when my spirit will be travelling starwards? We think so much of this poor corruptible body, which, after all, is nothing but a worn-out garment.

'I don't think I ever heard Mr. Rutherford read so beautifully as he did that day. When he came to that verse, "O death, where is thy sting?" his voice rang like the sound of a clarion,—the air seemed vibrant with it. And so we left him, our weak and erring one, to the mercy of the All-Merciful.

'Dorothy and I were talking about that last evening when she came down to Morningside to tell me about her mother. Craig would fetch her in an hour, she said. The dear child looked so pale and tired, but she said it would rest her to talk to me.

'"Aunt Mary," she said, "I cannot help feeling happy about Arthur. I am sure, from what Canon Morse told mother, that our poor boy bitterly repented his wrong-doings—that he would have given much to make amends. He often made such sad little speeches to mother. I asked Canon Morse if I were wrong to be so hopeful, and he said, 'Certainly not. It was the lost and wandering sheep for which the Divine Shepherd sought. Why should we not hope, Lady Dorothy, when there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, as we trust and believe your brother did?' And then he took a little shabby brown book out of his pocket—Scrupoli's

Spiritual Combat I found it was afterwards—and read me the following passage. I have copied it out for mother :—

'"'How shall our Divine Shepherd, who followed after His lost sheep for three-and-thirty years with loud and bitter cries through that painful and thorny way, wherein He spilt His heart's blood and laid down His life—how shall He refuse to turn His quickening glance upon the poor sheep which now follows Him with a desire, though sometimes faint and feeble, to obey Him! If He ceased not to search most diligently for the blind and deaf sinner, the lost piece of money of the Gospel, till He found him, can He abandon one who, like a lost sheep, cries and calls piteously upon his Shepherd?'"

'Is not that beautiful, Joan? You know I always share my good things with you. I am glad to tell you that Craig is a great comfort to his parents. He cycles or motors over every day. But he looks sad and careworn.'

Joan pondered over this last sentence a long time.

She tried hard to conceal her restlessness and to appear outwardly cheerful, but every day the task became more difficult. She was pining to be back at Morningside. There was trouble in her immediate circle, but for the first time in her life she was shunted and treated as an outsider. No one really missed her but Lady Mary, and she was too much absorbed in the Merritons' sorrow to think of her own dulness.

Joan could picture the daily life. Every morning Dorothy would run across to Morningside to tell Lady Mary how her mother had passed the night, and then in all probability Lady Mary would walk over to the Abbey before luncheon. Very likely she would remain until after afternoon tea, or even longer, if Lady Merriton wanted her. Then she would come back and eat her solitary dinner. But possibly Craig would look in on his way to Aldershot for a few minutes' chat. 'They will do nothing without her,' thought Joan. 'And

as for Lord Merriton, the dear thing will be fussing round him from morning to night. And there will not be even the smallest gap in the hedge for this little black sheep.'

The next news that reached Joan was that Lady Merriton was ill, and that the Earl had telegraphed for a London physician. But his opinion was distinctly favourable. The nerves had given way from the long strain, and Sir Philip Deane strongly advised immediate change to some salubrious seaside resort.

'My brother and Dorothy have gone down to look at a house at Eastbourne that Lord Templeton has offered to lend them for two months,' wrote Lady Mary, 'and I will let you know their decision.'

And she actually wrote again the next day.

We have been holding a family council in my brother's library. He and Dorothy were delighted with Gilnockie. It is a charming house, not large, but extremely comfortable, and in a most pleasant situation. It is on the edge of the downs, but some of the upper windows command a view of the sea and Beachy Head. Dorothy says that they can just manage to squeeze me and Dunlop in; for I must tell you, Joan, that my brother refuses to go without me, and Lady Merriton was equally pressing. So, my dear child, our Folkestone plan has shrivelled up into nothingness. But I know that you will understand that, under the circumstances, I could not well refuse.

And by return of post came Joan's impetuous answer to Morningside.

'Of course you could not refuse,' wrote Joan in her straggling girlish hand, which Lady Mary always thought so frank and characteristic. 'Do you think you need explain that to me, and that I am not aware how necessary you are to them all, and that there is no one like my dear Lady Mary when one is in trouble? I know Dorothy thinks you

are wonderful, and it will be such a help and comfort to her to have you under the same roof. It will set her free to take walks and rides with her father. Indeed, no arrangement could be better.

'You must not consider me for a moment. Besides, Heath is thinking of taking a very nice furnished house at Revelstoke for the holidays. It is a quiet little place and quite near—about an hour by train. The house belongs to some people Heath knows; but they are going abroad, and they would be quite willing to let it for six or seven weeks. Heath took Silence over to see it the other afternoon, and she seemed very pleased with it. It is on the sea-front, and there is only a little strip of green between it and the beach. We are to go about the 3rd of August. I think Silence and the children will like it. I fancy Jess needs a change; she is growing so fast, and is so excessively tiresome.'

But Joan was too truthful to pretend to any enthusiasm on the subject. Lady Mary was not too much engrossed by her own people to notice this indifference, and a few days later she wrote privately to Canon Leigh and begged him to give her his candid opinion of Joan. 'She is a very faithful correspondent, and I hear from her regularly three times a week; but, all the same, I shall be glad to know if she seems well and cheerful.'

Canon Leigh's answer to this was fairly satisfactory on the whole.

'We are very much pleased with Joan,' he wrote; 'she is evidently home-sick and depressed, but she tries so hard to hide it. She has plenty of pluck and spirit, and will not let herself be beaten.

'She is certainly a little paler and thinner—Silence was only saying so last night—but we think she is well. All this sad business about Lord Josselyn worried her—she was so full of sympathy for you all.

'I know Joan told you about our plans for August.

Silence and I have taken rather a fancy to Revelstoke. And it is just at a convenient distance for me, as I have business which will oblige me to take a day at St. Breda's now and then. Nothing connected with the Cathedral, only with my own literary work. Joan does not seem enthusiastic about Revelstoke; but I am sure the sea air will do her good, and the boys will give her plenty of occupation. Anyhow, we shall all do our best to make our visit as pleasant as possible.

'There is one thing which I know will please you, as you were fully aware of our difficulty. Joan certainly gets on better with Silence, and is much less exacting in her demands. Of course, now and then there are little rubs and frictions. As their natures are so dissimilar, we must expect this. But Joan has herself better in hand, and is learning to be a little tactful. We try to make the child happy, and you know my dear wife well enough to be sure of her goodness of heart. She is always planning something for Joan's comfort and pleasure.

'There, I am summoned to the Dean, and must end my letter, as it is just time for the afternoon post. Silence sends her kind love.—Yours, HEATH LEIGH.'

CHAPTER XXV

'A NUT-BROWNE MAYDE'

Be useful where thou livest, that they may
Both want and wish thy pleasing presence still.
Kindness, good parts, great places are the way
To compass this. Find out men's wants and will,
And meet them there. All worldly joys go less
To the one joy of doing kindnesses.

GEORGE HERBERT.

ONE morning towards the end of June, Joan crossed the little green before St. Breda's Lodge on her way to the Cathedral. In the early stillness and freshness the Precincts looked their best. The leafage of the elms and limes was still vividly green and unsoiled by dust. Some rooks were cawing in the distance, and the jackdaws were flying round the Cathedral towers; two of Wanda's doves had fluttered down from the stable roof and were strutting daintily across the grass; a blackbird was trilling from an alder bush in Kenwyn garden.

The month of Roses, as Joan called it, had always been a favourite season with her and Lady Mary, and she used to write glowing descriptions of the garden at St. Breda's Lodge.

'Heath is very proud of his garden,' she wrote; 'and I am glad to see that both he and Silence take a great deal of interest in it, though neither of them are experienced gardeners. But I think even you, dear Lady Mary, would find much to admire. The Guelder roses are over, but the elders are flowering, and the great bushes of syringa look still like big bridal bouquets. But the irises are our chief pride. We have quite a show in the kitchen garden and down one side of the croquet lawn, and there are more growing in the front. They were Canon Ramsbotham's favourite flower. He was Heath's predecessor, you know. I remember your saying once how many fine species flower in June, and that the iris is really a plant for nine months in the year. Yesterday afternoon Heath and I were admiring the colouring of the flag irises—some were pale clear yellow, others veined and clouded with crimson and brown on the petals. Then there are some grey-lavender, and purple with white veining, and others that can only be defined as smoky-bronze. And I am sure you would admire the wide border of London pride under the row of Madonna lilies. I always think "those delicate clouds of faint pink bloom" so charming.'

Joan was doing her best to interest herself in her surroundings; but, as she told herself somewhat bitterly, it was rather like driving a springless cart over stones—one got more jars than enjoyment.

The bell was ringing for service, and Joan quickened her loitering pace. As she seated herself beside Silence, three ladies entered the choir; but, as they occupied the stalls almost immediately behind her, she had taken no notice of them. When service was over, Silence went out at once. She had generally some business in the town before returning home. At first she had waited for Joan to join her, but she had long ceased to expect this. On this occasion, however, Joan hurried after her. But before she reached the steps, some one touched her on the arm, and as she turned round she

saw, to her intense surprise, that it was Lady Cicely O'Brien.

Joan's start and exclamation made Lady Cicely smile.

'I thought you did not see me,' she said, 'and you were walking so fast that I had almost to run after you. I am with my cousins, Joan—Kathleen and Bertha Mostyn. We motored in from Peterfield. They are going round the Cathedral with the verger, but I have seen it twice already, and I said I would rather stay and talk to you—that is, if you are willing and at leisure?'

'I have nothing to do, and I shall be simply delighted,' returned Joan. 'Would you like to go outside—there is a seat nearly opposite this door, and it is so quiet in the Precincts?' And as Lady Cicely assented to this, they strolled down the flagged path.

Lady Cicely chatted on in her lively way. She was beautifully dressed, as usual, and looked prettier than ever. She was a brunette, but the brown cheeks glowed with health and colour. There was something piquante about the small mouth and little pointed chin; and the Irish blue eyes, with the long dark lashes, were certainly lovely. Joan felt a strange sinking of heart as she glanced at her. How could any one long resist such a bewitching young creature?'

'I know this place well,' observed Lady Cicely, unfurling her white sunshade, which, with its faint pink lining, made a charming background to her face. Joan was quite aware that the white dress and hat, with all their simplicity, had come from Paris. Lady Cicely looked what she was, the spoilt child of fortune, to whom money was no object. Youth, beauty, wealth—certainly the fairies had been lavish of their good gifts!

Could anything be lacking to this richly-dowered young princess?

'I once lunched at St. Breda's Lodge with the Ramsbothams,' she continued. 'Diana took me all over the house, so you see I can picture you there.'

'I had no idea of that, Lady Cicely.'

'Lady Cicely!' indignantly. 'Aren't you ashamed to be so stiff and ceremonious? At Brantwood it was always Cicely and Joan. But if you wish me to call you Miss Leigh!' putting on an offended air.

'No, no. Of course I will call you Cicely—I always do to Dorothy.' Then, at the mention of her friend, Lady Cicely's charming face grew suddenly grave.

'I heard from Dorothy this morning. She says they will not go to Eastbourne for another ten days, as Lady Merriton is not strong enough for the journey. You know, the doctor wanted her to go away at once—in these nervous breakdowns there is nothing like change—but she is so weak they are afraid to move her.'

'Yes, I know; Lady Mary told me the same thing in her last letter. They cannot interest her in anything. She will talk of nothing but poor Lord Josselyn. She has all his old photos by her, in all stages of infancy and childhood, and she recalls his baby speeches. Lady Mary says it is so pitiful to hear her.'

'But we cannot wonder at it, Joan. This is the third son she has lost—it is enough to break her down.'

'Yes, and she has only Craig left.' Then, as Joan said this, the blue eyes were suddenly veiled and a tinge of colour came to Lady Cicely's cheek. But Joan took no notice. 'I always forget that Craig is Lord Josselyn now, but one will have to get used to it.'

'Oh yes, I suppose so, but it sounds strange.' But Lady Cicely's voice had lost its gay note; she looked

pensive, and even a little sad. 'I hear Lady Mary means to accompany them to Gilnockie. Dorothy hopes she will remain with them until they go back to the Abbey.'

'I am sure she fully intends to do that.'

'Dorothy wants me to come to them before they leave Gilnockie,' went on Lady Cicely. 'She is kind enough to say that they do not regard me as a visitor, and that she thinks in a few weeks' time her mother will be glad to have me.'

'You will go, of course?' but Joan's voice was a little abrupt.

'I am not sure,' returned Lady Cicely in a hesitating tone. 'I don't like to refuse Dorothy, but it seems to me that when people are in trouble they only want their own belongings. After all, I am an outsider.'

'Dorothy does not seem to think so'—Joan had got her voice under control again. 'I think it is a very good test of friendship if people in adversity are anxious for one's society. If they really want to have you, there is no reason for you to refuse.'

'Of course I should love to go; I am so fond of them all, and Lady Mary is a special favourite of mine. But I cannot quite make up my mind, and as Dorothy has fixed no special time, there is no need to decide now.' As Lady Cicely spoke, there was a worried line across her forehead which made her look years older; but Joan did not see this, she was looking across the sunny green, and her lips were pressed together.

'Dorothy has fixed no time—she is waiting until Craig can join them. Cicely is aware of that, and she is afraid to go, for fear of further disappointment. Poor girl, I believe she is beginning to care for him; but they are sacrificing her without any consideration

for the consequences'; and a softer expression came to Joan's face.

'No, there is no need for you to decide now,' she said quite naturally; 'but it would be hardly kind to Dorothy to refuse.' And then she changed the subject by telling her companion about the house at Revelstoke; and when she had finished, Lady Cicely detailed her autumn plans. She was going for a round of visits in Derbyshire, Shropshire, and Scotland.

'I do not expect to be back in town until the middle of December,' she finished.

'What a bird of passage you are, Cicely!'

'Yes, am I not—a regular Wandering Jewess!' with a little laugh. 'Marjorie often calls me the hare with many friends. But, do you know, I am getting just a little tired of it. Father sometimes talks of settling down at Kildare—that is near Killarney, you know. He says he is ashamed of being an absentee landlord any more, and that his tenants need him. Do you know, Joan, I rather like the idea.'

'Your cousin Marjorie once told me that she felt buried alive at Kildare; that one saw nothing but barefooted gossoons from morning to night; and that, in spite of the beauty of the place, she found life there deadly dull and triste.'

'Oh, Marjorie always exaggerates. There are lots of nice people round—decent farmers and bailiffs in good homespun stockings. I expect she meant the children living in the cottages at Eileen's Corner—they are rather a ragged lot. But I was born at Kildare, and I love every stone of our old house. It is only mother who sets her face against the place. Will you come and see me there some time, Joan?' Then, as Joan smiled and nodded—'Very well then, I shall hold

you to your promise. I shall make Dorothy bring you, and you shall see our beautiful lake, and make acquaintance with a jaunting-car. Now,' consulting the little watch on her wrist, 'have you any idea how late it is? Those girls will be looking for us, and our motor will be waiting.' And then they went back to the Cathedral, where they found the Mostyn girls, limp with fatigue, resting themselves after their labours. Joan was introduced to them, and then they all walked down to the little square, where they found a very smart motor with two chauffeurs.

'Good-bye, Joan,' said Lady Cicely, with a warm kiss. 'It has been such a pleasure to see you. *Au revoir, ma chère*'—and she gave a gay little wave of her hand.

'I don't think I ever saw hair like Miss Leigh's,' observed Kathleen Mostyn; 'it is very beautiful. But I thought you said that she was pretty?'

'Oh no, I never said that, Kitty; but when you come to know her you will think Joan charming.' And then Lady Cicely tied her gauze veil over her Paris hat and settled herself comfortably.

'Did you notice that splendid motor standing before Allsop's?' asked her brother, as Joan joined them at the luncheon-table. 'I have an idea that it belongs to those three ladies who were sitting behind you and Silence. One of them was an uncommonly pretty girl. I passed her on my way to the vestry. She is a stranger, of course, and yet I seemed to know her face.'

'I once showed you her photograph,' returned Joan. 'That was Lady Cicely O'Brien, and the motor belongs to her friends, the Mostyns of Peterfield.'

'Oh, I have heard of them. Peterfield Hall is

quite palatial. So that was Lady Cicely, whom Captain Bastow——?' but here Canon Leigh pulled himself up rather awkwardly.

'You must call him Lord Josselyn now,' returned Joan calmly. 'Yes, that is the girl the Merritons want to have for their daughter-in-law. She is very pretty, is she not, Heath?' But her brother was too much vexed with himself to do more than mutter an assent.

'I was just going to put my foot in it,' he said to his wife afterwards, 'but Joan never turned a hair. I never saw such a plucky girl. "You must call him Lord Josselyn now"—just as coolly and quietly as possible. Well,' with a sigh, 'I can only say that Lady Cicely is a formidable rival. She is the prettiest little nut-browne mayde I have seen for a long time.'

'I thought Joan was rather nice about it all,' returned Silence; 'but then she really likes Lady Cicely. I do wish this business could be settled one way or another, Heath; for, with all her courage, Joan is looking terribly thin. Mrs. Ramsay was only saying so yesterday. I shall be glad when August comes and we can get her to Revelstoke.'

'Well, my dear, I am afraid she must just dree her weird,' observed her husband, 'for we cannot expect things to settle themselves yet. It is hardly a time for marrying and giving in marriage, when they have only just buried that poor fellow.' And then Canon Leigh went off to his study.

Joan would hardly have endorsed her brother's words. She felt anything but plucky as she sauntered aimlessly up and down the croquet lawn. Her talk with Lady Cicely had unsettled her, and brought back the old unbearable pain, and she could not settle to

any employment. It was rather a relief when she saw Richard Trafford with his familiar coming towards her.

'I am come on an embassage, Miss Leigh,' he said persuasively. 'My very much married maiden aunt is likely to be a grass widow for some hours, and it will be a gracious and neighbourly act on your part if you will have tea with her and enliven her loneliness.'

'Of course I will come; I always enjoy having tea at Kenwyn. I suppose you and Canon Ramsay are going out?'

'We are,' replied Dick gravely. 'We are going to Revelstoke, and my venerable uncle at the eleventh hour decided to accompany us. I was just remarking at luncheon that Dagon and I were pining for a whiff of sea air, and my recently connected relation seemed to applaud the idea. We are to dine at that nice little hotel and come back by starlight, and the watchman will admit us into the Precincts with a look of grieved surprise.'

'You might have asked Mrs. Ramsay to go too.'

'We did, Miss Leigh—yea verily, we did. For when have I ever neglected my Aunt Felicia? But she said she had been giddy gadding—these were her words—every day for a week, and that she was tired and would rather stay at home. Now I must make tracks for the station or I shall be late. *Au revoir.*' But there was a kind expression on Dick's handsome face as he looked at the girl, for his keen eyes had noticed her depression.

Joan was always willing to go to Kenwyn—the restful atmosphere soothed her. She had become quite attached to Mrs. Ramsay, who now called her by her Christian name and treated her with the utmost friendliness.

'I wonder why you are looking at me so hard, Joan,' observed Mrs. Ramsay, smiling, as they sat facing each other at the cosy tea-table. Then Joan flushed slightly.

'Was I staring? Silence says that is one of my bad habits. But I did not mean to be rude. I think I like looking at you because you seem so happy and peaceful, and—and I cannot help envying you,' with a sudden burst of girlish frankness.

'I was not always happy,' returned Felicia, and there was a thoughtful look in her soft eyes. 'When I was your age, Joan, and indeed for many years afterwards, life seemed very dreary and difficult. I had lost what I most prized, and I thought I should never find it again. But if one waits long enough——' And then under her breath—'The good wine of life is sometimes poured out late.'

'I know what you mean,' returned Joan eagerly. 'But when one is young and strong and full of life, happiness seems one's right. It does not seem natural to suffer. I suppose I am self-willed and rebellious, but I do so want things to go smoothly.' And then Joan broke off with an embarrassed little laugh; for, much as she was attracted to this sweet woman, it would be hardly possible to take her into confidence. 'I am in a naughty, discontented mood, Mrs. Ramsay, and you must just scold me.'

'My dear, I should never do that. But I should like to help you, because I see things are somewhat wrong with you. No,' as Joan winced at this, 'you need tell me nothing; perhaps I understand more than you think. Shall I talk to you a little about my old life in Regent's Park and the way my erratic nephew treated me? I think it will amuse you.

Dick was always such a dear, whimsical fellow, but with such a good heart.' And Felicia talked on in her gentle way, and Joan was so interested that the dressing-bell quite startled them.

Felicia refused to part with Joan, and a message was sent across to St. Breda's Lodge. After dinner they sat in the garden until the dews drove them indoors. Joan had not been solicited for her confidence—indeed, she had scarcely spoken of herself the whole evening—but Felicia was glad to see that the girl's face had lost its strained, tired expression.

'You have done me good,' observed Joan gratefully, when at last she wished her hostess good-night. And she spoke the truth. But Felicia sighed a little as she closed the door. How well she understood it all—that passionate revolt of youth. 'When one is young and strong and full of life, happiness seems one's right,' Joan had said. And how true this was! 'Poor child! but she has not gone through my experience,' she thought. 'I used to wonder how I lived through that day when I took up the paper and read the announcement of Alick's marriage. And now I am his wife.' And the happy look on Felicia's face was good to see.

CHAPTER XXVI

'SHE IS VERY MUCH CHANGED'

> Let us no more contend, nor blame
> Each other, blam'd enough elsewhere, but arrive
> In offices of love, how we may lighten
> Each other's burden in our hour of woe.
>
> MILTON.

> Who means to help must still support the load.
>
> BROWNING.

ABOUT the middle of July the Merritons were comfortably settled at Gilnockie. The invalid had borne the journey better than they expected, and there was some improvement in her condition. But Joan noticed that Lady Mary did not write with her customary cheerfulness, neither did she enter into any full particulars of their daily life. The weather was very fine, she wrote—unusually so for July. They had not had a wet day. But her brother had been too busy to ride much with Dorothy. He was a great deal harassed with some disagreeable business connected with poor Josselyn, which they were very anxious to keep from Lady Merriton, as she was not in a state for more worry. Craig came over whenever he could get leave and tried to help his father, and his mother generally seemed more like herself when he was in the house.

Joan always felt vaguely uneasy after one of these letters; but she had no idea of the trying time Lady Mary was having at Gilnockie. It was sad to see the Earl with his broad shoulders bowed down by care and grievous anxiety. 'This will make an old man of me, Mary,' he would say to her sometimes of an evening, when she went into the little room appropriated to his use to bid him good-night. And he would look up at her with tired eyes and puckered forehead.

'You must pull yourself together, George,' she would say, laying her soft hand on his arm. 'Think how we all depend on you. Hildegarde was only saying this afternoon what a comfort you had been to her through the trouble. She leans on you so entirely.' But Lord Merriton only shook his head.

'She is very much changed. Sometimes,' in rather a husky tone, 'I am afraid that she will never be quite the same again. Hildegarde has more spirit than strength.'

'Oh, we must give her time,' returned Lady Mary with forced cheerfulness. But it was evident that her brother's attention was wandering to the papers that lay before him.

'We shall have to sell that piece of land, Mary. Lathom says it is the best thing to do'—Lathom and Leadbeater were the family lawyers, who had advised generations of Merritons—'and as Craig is willing, we shall put it up for sale at once. I don't deny that it is like selling my own flesh and blood. But if I am to sleep in my bed at night, I must put things straight. When she is a little better I am going to talk to Hildegarde about letting the Grosvenor Square house to that American millionaire who wants it for three years. Lathom is very urgent with me about that.

He says that we cannot afford for the present to keep up two such large establishments—that we had better lie low until we have recovered ourselves a bit.'

'I am quite sure that Mr. Lathom is right, George, and that it would be well to follow his advice. I am afraid I must not talk any longer now, as Hildegarde asked me to come to her.'

'I do not know what we should all do without you, Mary,' he said affectionately. 'I am afraid you are not having a particularly cheerful time just now.' But Lady Mary only smiled and let this pass.

But if her heart ached for her brother's anxieties, it was full of pity for the bereaved mother. The Earl had not exaggerated when he spoke of her changed appearance. It was sad to see how worn and shrunken the comely, well-preserved woman looked. She had lost the old stateliness of bearing which, in spite of the shabbiest dress, made her appear the great lady. Her movements were restless and uncertain, and she harped incessantly on old grievances in a way that got on her listeners' nerves.

'I cannot understand mother,' observed Dorothy one night, when she had followed her aunt into her bedroom under pretext of helping her, but in reality to get a little comfort. 'How tired you look, Aunt Mary! It has been such a trying day, and you have borne the brunt of it, while Craig and I were tramping over the downs. And I know mother nearly talked you to death.'

'Nearly, but not quite,' returned Lady Mary with a patient smile. 'You must not worry about me, Dollie, my dear.'

'Mother never used to be so inconsiderate,' went on the girl; 'she always noticed directly when people

were tired. But she is not a bit like her old self. At the Hôtel de Montagne she was so beautifully calm and quiet; she never gave a moment's trouble, and Sister Rose could not say enough in her praise. She was such an example to us all. And now she is so fractious and complaining. She is always wanting Craig to come, and yet she cannot help worrying him when he is here.'

'Oh, I think you are wrong there, my dear. I told Joan in one of my letters that your mother was certainly more like herself when Craig was in the house. The fact is, your mother has had a severe shock and is not in her normal condition. It is not easy to diagnose nerves. She is somehow unbalanced and has lost the true proportion of things. Little things appear great and she is not strong enough to control her irritability. She was very much hurt when Craig went out of the room so abruptly this morning.'

'Oh, I can explain that,' returned Dorothy eagerly. 'He told me himself that he only did it to prevent an awkward discussion. Mother was saying something about having Cicely O'Brien down for a few days, as she was so cheerful and would do us good. But he was so afraid of what she might say next that he fairly fled. He seemed to think it so odd that she should care to have a lively girl like Cicely staying at Gilnockie just now.'

Perhaps Lady Mary thought it odd too, though she did not admit it to Dorothy. But when Lady Merriton recurred to the subject the very next day, she suggested mildly that it was rather soon to have visitors.

'I think we are more comfortable by ourselves,' she finished frankly. But Lady Merriton only stared at her in surprise.

'Too soon!' she said rather excitedly. 'My dear Mary, is there any way of measuring time in trouble? A day is like a week, and a week a month. Why, it seems at least a year ago since my boy last looked at me.' And here she began to sob. 'It was cruel of you to remind me of my sorrow—not that I forget it one single waking moment—but I have still two children living, and I do not wish to be a selfish mother because my heart is broken.'

'My dear Hildegarde, you must not mistake me, or think I want to thwart your wishes; when I said it was rather soon for visitors, I was speaking conventionally.'

'We do not look upon Cicely O'Brien as a visitor or an outsider,' returned Lady Merriton peevishly. 'Dorothy is extremely fond of her, and so am I. She is young, but so delightfully sympathetic. It would be good for Dorothy. This is such a dull household.'

'Then have her by all means, dear.'

'I am afraid to have her,' returned Lady Merriton gloomily, 'for Craig is so extraordinary, and one can never be sure how he will behave. He was barely civil to her when she was staying at the Abbey.'

Lady Mary was silent.

'Why don't you say something?' continued the invalid fretfully, her face and hands working with nervousness. 'You are generally ready with your advice. You are not kind to me this morning, and yet you can see how low and worried I am. Craig little thought how he jarred my nerves when he went out of the room in that rude way and slammed the door.'

'Oh, not slammed the door, my dear Hildegarde; Craig is far too gentlemanly to do such a thing. He

only shut it firmly, because there is something defective with the lock and the windows were open.'

But this explanation, which was perfectly true, did not satisfy Lady Merriton. She had worked herself up to the belief that Craig was in a temper. Truly, the poor lady was not in a normal condition.

That evening there was another consultation in Lady Mary's bedroom, which ended by her saying in an unusually decided tone—'I think, after all, that it will be best for you to write to Cicely without any further delay and ask her to come for a fortnight. It will please your mother.' And as Dorothy seemed willing to follow this advice, the note was soon written. And that day the home atmosphere seemed a little more peaceful.

Lady Mary told herself that she had done the right thing. It was therefore rather a disappointment when Dorothy came to her with a long face, with an opened letter in her hand.

'Oh dear, what a world this is, Aunt Mary! After all, Cicely cannot come. She says there is nothing she would love more than to come to Gilnockie and cheer us up, but that Amabel has had a motor accident and broken a small bone in her ankle, and as Lord Cecil is detained with business at Vienna, she cannot possibly leave her.'

Lady Amabel was Lady Cicely's only sister, and they were co-heiresses to the O'Brien property. Lady Amabel had been considered a beauty, and had become engaged in her first season to the youngest son of the Duke of Rephingham.

'Cicely says she was ready to cry with disappointment when she read my note,' continued Dorothy; 'but there, you had better read her letter—it is so

nice and sympathetic—while I go and break the news to mother.'

But Lady Merriton, who had had a better night than usual, took it more calmly than they expected. 'Of course she could not leave Amabel,' she said in a voice almost of rebuke; 'I should be the very last person to ask her to neglect her duty.' Nevertheless, she seemed a little depressed the remainder of the day.

But by and by a new difficulty put the thought of Lady Cicely out of her head.

One afternoon when Lord Merriton came into the drawing-room he found his wife in a state of nervous agitation, which Lady Mary was vainly trying to soothe.

'Hildegarde is a little upset,' she said quietly. 'No, there is nothing the matter, George,' as the Earl looked uneasy. 'We had a visitor, Mrs. Leith Williams, and her talk has tired her.'

'Why do you not tell your brother the truth, Mary?' returned her sister-in-law excitedly. 'How can I help being upset when that woman told me in the most abrupt, unfeeling way that Craig's company is to leave for India the first week in October! Merriton, he is coming this evening; you and Mary must talk to him. There is only one thing to be done—he must retire at once. His colonel, every one will understand that we cannot lose our only son, our——' Here the unhappy mother fell back upon her pillow with sobs that wrung her husband's heart.

'Hildegarde, my love, you are making yourself ill! Of course we will speak to Craig. It shall be arranged. I have had too much business even to think of the matter. It shall be put before him this evening.'

But it was some time before Lady Merriton could be calmed.

'You had better leave her to me, George,' observed Lady Mary presently. 'Dorothy is waiting for you all this time to go out with her.'

Then the Earl reluctantly withdrew, while his sister sat quietly beside the invalid, fanning her and saying a comforting word from time to time.

Once a hot, shaking hand was laid on hers. 'Mary, how good you are to me, and I am such a trial to you all, and yet you never lose patience with me.'

'Because I am so sorry for you, my poor dear. 'Now you must not talk. I am going to read you the evening Psalms, and then you must try to sleep.'

Lord Merriton was so unusually silent during dinner that evening that Craig watched him a little uneasily. Was it his fancy that his father looked older, and that he was visibly losing flesh? 'That last bit of business has been too much for him,' thought the young man. Then, as he rose to open the door for Lady Mary and Dorothy, the former whispered, 'Your father wants to speak to you about something, Craig, so we shall not expect you in the drawing-room just yet.' And Craig nodded and went back to his seat.

'We shall neither of us take any more wine,' observed Lord Merriton, 'so I may as well ring for the coffee and then we shall not be disturbed. I have something rather important to discuss with you this evening.'

Then a dark flush crossed Craig's face, for he knew well the subject on which his father meant to speak to him. For days he had thought of little else, and now the crucial moment had come. Nevertheless, Craig lit his cigar, and when the coffee came he drank it with apparent relish, knowing well that before many minutes

were over he would be asked to sacrifice the ambition and work he so dearly prized.

The Earl was visibly embarrassed. He cleared his voice once or twice, and fidgeted with his spoon.

'Your mother asked me to speak to you, Craig,' he commenced jerkily. 'Mrs. Leith Williams has been here this afternoon and told her that your company has been ordered to India early in October. Is this a fact?'

'Yes, sir, but I have only known it for the last three days.'

'But, my dear boy, there is no time to be lost. It is out of the question that we can part with you. Good heavens'—as Craig remained silent—'are we to be deprived of all our sons?'

'There is no need for this excitement, father,' returned Craig coldly. 'It would be better for you to tell me what my mother and you wish me to do. I am not without some sense of duty, and though I tell you plainly that my whole future happiness is at stake, I hope I am capable of making some sacrifice.'

'Oh, God bless you, my boy!' and Lord Merriton seized his son's hand. 'I think if you went to India it would be your mother's death-blow. If you had seen her this afternoon, you would know I am telling you the truth.'

'Then you wish me to retire from active service?' There was a hard tone in Craig's voice.

'Yes, yes, send in your papers—your colonel will understand. There will be no difficulty—no difficulty at all. Lathom will find us the money. I shall talk to your mother about letting the Grosvenor Square house, and in a year or two we shall be on our legs again. Good God, how grateful I feel! you have

lifted a burden off my shoulders. I am growing an old man, Craig, and I do not bear things as I used to do.' Then a softer look came into the young man's eyes.

'You have always been good to us, sir, and we owe you some return. I must try and make up for my brothers. Father, do you know, I was going to make one condition before I consented to send in my papers, but I thought better of it.'

'I think I understand what you mean, Craig.'

'I am sure you do, sir; there can be no mistake on that point. But it seemed a shabby sort of thing to do. One ought to do one's duty without looking for reward.'

'You are right there, my boy.'

'All the same, father, I was strongly tempted to make your consent to my marriage with Joan the sole condition of giving up my commission; but my conscience has got the better of me, you see.' But as Craig said this, the Earl looked at him in evident bewilderment.

'But we understood the girl had refused you?'

'That does not make any difference, sir. A girl does not always know her own mind. I shall not be too proud to ask her again. But it is too late to discuss this. I think we had better go to the drawing-room and set my mother's mind at rest.' And Craig spoke with such quiet resolve and dignity that his father looked at him with awed admiration.

'A fine, manly fellow,' he muttered to himself. 'He is one of the fighting Bastows—every inch a soldier. It is a grievous pity, but for Hildegarde's sake he must not go.' And the Earl shook his grey head rather sadly as he followed his son more slowly.

CHAPTER XXVII

'WHAT AM I TO DO WITH MY LIFE?'

A turn in the pathway of duty—
I stood in the perfect day's prime,
Close, close to the hillside of beauty;
The voice from the Silence said, 'Climb!'

The road to the beautiful regions
Lies ever through Duty's hard way.
Oh, ye who go searching in legions,
Know this, and be patient to-day.

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

CRAIG had waited for his father to join him, and as they entered the room together, Lady Merriton raised herself up on her couch. She was shaking from head to foot with intense anxiety.

'Oh, Merriton, how long you have been! I was just going to send Dorothy to the dining-room. I could not have borne the suspense a minute longer.' But before her husband could answer, Craig was beside her.

'It is all right, mother—don't worry. Of course, under the circumstances, I cannot leave you.'

Then Lady Merriton threw her arms round him. 'God bless you, my darling boy!' she said hysterically, as she wept on his shoulder.

Craig was very gentle with her. He was shocked

to see the ravages that grief and nervous suffering had wrought in her appearance. She had been a good and loving mother to them all, and now her feebleness appealed to him very forcibly. He was touched by her unaccustomed caresses, for she had rarely been demonstrative with her sons. 'You are our dear good boy,' she whispered. 'Your father and I will never forget this,' kissing the hand she held.

Craig could not stay long, but she had calmed down and looked more like herself before he left her. When he had bidden her good-night, he made a sign to Lady Mary to join him outside, and she followed him at once.

'Oh, Craig, I am so thankful about this!' she said, taking his hand. 'But of course I never doubted that you would do your duty. Your mother will get well now.'

'I hope so,' he returned gloomily; 'but I never saw her look like this. But I have no time to talk. I only want to know if you are going to tell Joan about this?'

'Tell Joan!' with a faint flush of surprise. 'I have not thought about it. Surely there is no hurry?'

'No hurry at all; in fact, I would prefer her not hearing about things until they are actually settled. All right, we understand each other, Aunt Mary. We will talk about this later on.' And then he bade her good-night.

'Joan! It has gone deeper than I thought,' she said to herself, as she went back to the drawing-room. 'Well, there is no need for me to write for the next two or three days.'

But Lady Mary lay awake longer than usual that night.

'Will the dear old days ever come back?' she

thought sadly. 'Well, Craig is doing his duty, and Joan and I must do ours; and the end He knoweth.' And with this calming thought she fell asleep.

Joan remained for some days in rather a restless state. Lady Cicely's unexpected appearance had unsettled her more than she had supposed. She did all in her power to hide her depression. Perhaps the close, sultry weather added to her discomfort. Silence, who noticed her pale cheeks and heavy eyes, was thankful to remember that in another ten days they would be at Revelstoke, enjoying the sea-breezes.

Joan was in such a condition of nervous tension that even trifles seemed to be unduly magnified. And when Lady Mary's bi-weekly letter was not on the breakfast-table as usual, she conjured up all sorts of gloomy fancies and her appetite failed her; and when, two days later, the expected letter had not yet arrived, she was so grave and silent that her brother looked at her anxiously.

'What are you going to do with yourself to-day, Joan? You look a bit seedy, my dear. You had better come with us to Huntsmoor. We shall be back for luncheon, and the drive will do you good.' But Joan shook her head.

'You are very kind, Heath, but I think it is too hot for driving, and the road to Huntsmoor is so exposed. I thought of going over to the Cathedral, and then I have letters to write.' And Joan rose hurriedly to prevent any more discussion and went out of the room.

'I hope there is nothing wrong at Gilnockie,' observed Canon Leigh; 'Joan looks worried this morning.' But Silence could give him no information. If they had only known it, the explanation of the delay was perfectly simple.

Lady Mary had fully intended to write; had placed herself at the writing-table and opened her blotting-case, when a violent throbbing in her temples warned her that one of her prostrating headaches was coming on, the invariable result of any protracted mental strain. No remedies could ward off the enemy, and Lady Mary could only creep up to bed and give herself up to Dunlop's devoted ministrations. Once she thought that she would ask Dorothy to send Joan a note; then the increasing pain put it out of her mind. 'Perhaps I shall be able to write myself to-morrow,' she said to herself that night. But the attack was an unusually severe one, and left her too weak and giddy to make the attempt.

There was a lump in Joan's throat as she put on her hat, and her eyes smarted with repressed tears. She had wakened with a heavy heart that morning. She had had such a strangely happy dream. She thought she was in the Brantwood woods with Craig. She was sitting on a bank, and he was just below her, picking primroses and throwing them into her lap by handfuls. Rascal was rioting in the young bracken; she could see his white coat as he rolled over and over. It was all so real and vivid. She could even feel the cool freshness of the heaped-up flowers in her lap. 'It is like a stream of molten gold,' she heard herself say. Then two strong hands gripped hers.

'Joan, how long is this to go on? When are you going to tell me the truth, that you love me as I love you?' Then, as she felt his arms round her, she woke.

'Oh, if I could have that dream again!' she thought, as she crossed the green. How dry and brown the grass looked for want of rain; even the leaves on the limes and elms were wilted and dusty. The sunshine

seemed to beat fiercely down on her, and there was an oppressive stillness in the atmosphere which probably heralded a storm before evening. Happily the Cathedral was cool. But when, at the last moment, she took her place in the choir, there were not more than half-a-dozen people in the stalls; and, with the exception of Mrs. Ramsay, these were strangers.

When service began, Joan tried to shake off her lassitude and depression. Then she turned suddenly cold and her heart beat almost to suffocation. Was this a continuation of her dream, or was that young man in the opposite stall really Craig? There he was looking across at her. Their eyes met. Of course it was he! Then Joan's head drooped over her book, and she looked no more. It was a comfort when she could kneel and hide her face, though it was doubtful how much she attended to her devotions. He had come—he had kept his promise—he had not forgotten her. Oh, how thankful she was that neither Heath nor Silence were there! Such were the tumultuous thoughts which coursed through her mind. And yet, as the boys' sweet voices chanted the opening verses of the Psalm, Joan's heart chimed in with a little song of joy. Whatever happened, it was good to see him again. Presently she would hear his dear voice, feel the grasp of his strong hand. 'Oh, how wicked I am,' thought Joan, 'I am not thinking of my prayers!' and then she strove bravely to control her wandering thoughts.

Craig behaved very well on the whole, but then Joan's appearance had given him no sudden shock. He had seen her from afar, had watched her as she walked quietly to her place. No doubt the sight of the slim girlish figure with its willowy grace stirred

his pulses. But it was not until he saw her sudden paleness and the quick flash of joy in her eyes that he lost his head for a minute.

She was glad to see him! Perhaps he had been a bit too sudden. How white she had turned! But no, when he looked again her colour had returned. He must try to put the whole thing aside and attend to the service; but Canon Ramsay's slow delivery, and the length of the first lesson, made him inwardly chafe. He was sure Joan was thinner; she looked different somehow, though he could see nothing except the brim of her hat while they were sitting down.

It may be doubted whether either of the young people had been much edified by the service. When the final amen rang through the sacred building, Joan was in no hurry to move from her seat. She waited until Mrs. Ramsay had left the choir. Then she saw Craig was waiting for her near the entrance, and she walked slowly towards him. He seemed to await her with impatience. As he grasped her hand there was a glow in his eyes which brought a quick flush to the girl's face. For the moment the overmastering sense of his personality seemed to dominate her, and it was only with a strong effort that she could regain her composure.

Craig was quite aware of her nervousness, though he took no apparent notice of the fact.

'I thought the service would never end,' he observed candidly. 'I am afraid I did not attend properly. Where are you going to take me, Joan? I want to find some cool, quiet place where we can have a little comfortable talk.'

Joan considered for a moment. She could not well take him to St. Breda's Lodge in the absence of Silence and her brother, and they would not be back for

another two hours. Besides, Wanda and Jess would be there.

'It is too hot in the Precincts,' she said, 'and I do not like the idea of talking in the Cathedral. If you will wait a moment, Craig, I will speak to the head verger. I know he will let us go into the library, it will be quite cool and quiet there.' Then Craig nodded and she hurried away.

Her riotous pulses were quieting now. Craig's coolness and easy assumption of friendliness were putting her more at her ease. Of course it was natural that he should want to talk to her; so much had happened since they had parted. Oh, how strong and well and brown he looked, and yet somehow he seemed older and more dignified. She must not forget he was Lord Josselyn now.

Joan had regained her old frank manner when she returned.

'Mr. Stevens says there is no one in the library this morning, and I think we shall find it tolerably cool there.' And she was right.

Craig looked appreciatively at the quaint, venerable rooms, with their book-lined walls and little nooks and recesses. They fixed on one with an open window commanding a view of a little green enclosure. Joan appropriated the solitary chair, while Craig took possession of the low narrow window-seat.

'I call this quite a decent place,' he observed. 'Why don't you take off your hat, Joan?' But she shook her head. 'Do you know,' with disconcerting abruptness, 'that I am not at all pleased with your appearance—you are certainly thinner.'

'Oh, what nonsense!' but Joan carefully avoided his eyes. 'I think we are all feeling the heat terribly. There seems no air anywhere; even the sunshine seems

dusty—you know what I mean. But we shall be going next week to Revelstoke.'

'So Aunt Mary told me yesterday.'

'Oh, were you at Gilnockie yesterday!' exclaimed Joan eagerly. 'Did she send me a message, Craig? I have been worrying myself dreadfully because she has not written to me this week as usual; but if she has sent me a message——' Then Craig laughed in rather an embarrassed way.

'To tell you the truth, none of the home people know that I have run over here to-day; for certain reasons I thought it best to keep my own counsel. But of course I can give you the latest and special edition of Gilnockie news.'

'Oh yes, please do!'

'Well, my mother is decidedly better. We are all happier about her. She has had two good nights, and actually went for a drive yesterday. My father and Dorothy went with her.'

'And Lady Mary?'

'Oh, Aunt Mary had been seedy for two or three days—one of those fiendish headaches of hers, I believe. But she was in the drawing-room, and declared that another night's sleep would put her to rights.'

'Oh, I was sure she was ill,' returned Joan in a distressed tone. But Craig combated this idea.

'No, not ill; only Dorothy gave me a hint on the subject. My mother has been leading them all such a life. The poor soul could not help it, but the brunt of it has come on Aunt Mary, and the worry and the heat together quite bowled her over. I remember now, she said something about writing to you to-day, so you will have her letter all right to-morrow.' And Joan gave a sigh of relief.

'You are quite sure that is all, Craig?' Then he looked at her with his honest eyes.

'That is all, to my knowledge, so there is no need for that long face.' But the girl's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

'If you knew how I long for her sometimes!' And when Craig put his hand over hers, the action seemed so brotherly that Joan did not draw it away.

'Dear, I know; but we cannot spare Aunt Mary yet. If you only realised the comfort she is to my poor mother and Dorothy, and as for my father——' Then one of Joan's bright, sudden smiles gladdened the young man's heart. This pale, depressed girl with the small peaky face was not like his old sweetheart Joan. What had they all done to her? He would alter all that! And Craig threw up his head with his old masterful air. But Joan's thoughts were busy at that moment with Lady Mary.

'Oh, I know what a darling she would be!' she went on. 'There is no one so dear and comforting when one is in trouble; it is not what she says, but one is so sure of her love and sympathy.'

'Yes, Aunt Mary is a good sort when she comes out of her groove'—Craig said in rather an off-hand way; 'but, like all the Bastows, she has her limitations. Joan, I have not come over to St. Breda's to talk about Aunt Mary, much as I appreciate her. I wanted to tell you myself that I have given up all idea of going to India; in fact, I have already sent in my papers.'

Joan gazed at him for a moment without speaking. 'Does that mean that you have thrown up your company—that you are retiring on your parents' account?' And as he nodded curtly—'Oh, Craig, how splendid of you, but how terribly hard!'

'There was nothing else to be done,' he returned gloomily. 'My father gave me to understand that my mother was not in a state for any more shocks, and she was already breaking her heart at the idea of parting with me. What could a fellow do under such circumstances, unless he acted like a selfish cad!'

'Oh, you were right—quite right; you never could have left those poor old people; but all the same I am so sorry for you.'

'I think I am sorry for myself,' he returned simply; 'but it is no good crying over spilt milk, so I must grin and bear it. But, Joan, what am I to do with my life?' And as Craig said this there was a pained and troubled look on his face which went to the girl's heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CRAIG HAS THE LAST WORD

Constancy and faithfulness mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves. They mean renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have on us.—ANON.

> Now I have tasted her sweet soul to the core—
> All other depths are shallow.
>
> KEATS.

IF Craig had come over to St. Breda's to seek comfort in Joan's sympathy, he had certainly no cause for disappointment. Joan was always a liberal giver, and she did not fail him now. For the moment she had forgotten the embarrassment of their mutual position. She could only remember that her old playmate and comrade was in grievous trouble, and that her woman's wits must find some way of helping him. No one else could understand him as she did. To most people Craig Bastow was only a well-meaning, pleasant-tempered fellow ; an honest, clean-living young Englishman, with the militant instinct of his forbears. Only to Joan, and perhaps, in a lesser degree, to Lady Cicely O'Brien, did he appear in the light of a hero. For, alas for her peace of mind ! the petted heiress was by no means indifferent to her friend's brother.

As for Joan, she thought there was no one to be compared with him. What did it matter if he were

not a miracle of cleverness, if he preferred soldiering to books, when he was true as steel and had never been known to shirk his duty or do a shabby action. If any one deserved to be happy, he did ; and yet, as she knew, the whole plan and purpose of his life was frustrated.

'What am I to do with my life?' he had said to her.

No wonder Joan poured out richly of her pity and sympathy. 'If you knew how sorry I am for you!' she said softly. 'But if you had gone to India and anything had happened, you would never have had another happy moment'; and here Joan's expression was very sweet. 'I think Lady Mary is right when she says we must just do our duty and face the consequences.'

'I think a woman is always more ready to play the martyr than a man,' he returned rather drily. 'If you knew how I hate the whole business! But of course,' checking himself with an impatient sigh, 'there was nothing else to be done. The question is, What am I to do with myself? One cannot loaf through life because one has a title.'

'You would not care to enter Parliament?' But as Joan made the suggestion she well knew what his answer would be.

'I am willing to fight for my country,' he returned a little fiercely, 'but I should be a sorry politician. Why, I could not make a speech to save my life ; and as to listening to a set of old fogies half the night, and bothering myself with their red tapeism and party questions—— No, Joan, that sort of thing would not suit my constitution at all.'

'Then why not try farming, Craig?'

But it was evident the young man received this sensible proposition with scant favour.

'It is necessary to serve some sort of apprenticeship if one is to be a good farmer; and the truth is, I hardly know a turnip from a mangel-wurzel. Now, my father loves the land,' went on Craig; 'he will stand for half-an-hour at a time admiring his prize cattle, or watching the men ploughing. If he had not had the misfortune to be a belted earl, he would have made a rattling good farmer. Under these circumstances I should have found my work cut out for me; guiding the team and ploughing would have suited me down to the ground.'

'Oh, Craig, how absurd you are!' But, all the same, Joan could see him do it. No manual labour would have come amiss to those strong, capable hands.

'As it is, I shall just loaf round at the governor's heels, help him with his accounts, and look after the keepers, and do a little shooting and fishing on my own account. A lively sort of billet for an active-minded soldier!'

Joan rested her chin on her hand and looked at him thoughtfully. Her brain was hard at work on his behalf. Then a brilliant idea came to her.

'Craig, it is no use talking to your father. With all his good-will, he seems a little helpless in these matters. Why don't you talk to your uncle, Lord Templeton?'

'To my Uncle Templeton! Whatever put that into your head, Joan?'

'Oh, I don't know. But I always liked him so much; he used to be so kind to me when I was a little girl, when he and Lady Templeton came to the Abbey. Dorothy told me he had been a soldier in his younger days, so that he could understand things; and besides, he is a man of the world.'

Craig looked at her admiringly. 'You have a wise little head of your own, Joan, and it is not a bad idea. Uncle Templeton is rather a knowing old fellow, though he and the governor have not hit it off as well as usual the last year or two. I believe Josselyn behaved rather badly.' But here Craig reddened and hurried on. 'I used to stay at Templeton a good deal when I was a youngster, and I recollect the handsome tips Clyde and I got when we first went to Eton.'

'Then why don't you go and ask his advice, Craig? He always seems so interested in you.'

'Yes, but Clyde was his favourite; he was dreadfully cut up when he heard of his death. Well, I don't mind running over to Templeton when the governor can spare me. I daresay the old boy will take it quite as a compliment; and I am rather fond of Aunt Miriam, though she is a bit frumpish and old-maidish.' Then Joan smiled happily, for she had gained her point.

Craig knew that his uncle would give him credit for disinterested motives, for neither he nor his brothers had any claim on the Templeton estate, which would be inherited by Lord Templeton's only brother, who was at present with his regiment in India; or, in the event of his death, by his eldest son. And up to the present time the Merritons had not been informed that Lady Templeton intended to leave her fortune in equal division between Dorothy and Craig.

'There is no need for your brother and Hubert to have everything,' she had said to her husband a few months previously. 'I am very fond of Dorothy, and, as she does not seem inclined to marry, she will be glad to be independent of her parents. And Craig is a fine fellow.' And Lord Templeton had offered no objection to this.

It was at this point that Joan suddenly bethought herself of Lady Cicely.

'Oh, by the bye, Craig,' she said a little hurriedly, 'I wonder if Dorothy told you that I saw Cicely O'Brien last week. She motored over with the Mostyn girls.' But Craig, who seemed sunk in a brown study, roused himself with difficulty.

'Cicely O'Brien?' he observed indifferently. 'Yes, I think Dollie did say something about it; but I did not take much notice.' Happy Joan tried to conceal her satisfaction—how little interest he showed at the mention of her rival's name!

'The Mostyn girls wanted to do the Cathedral, so Cicely and I sat out in the Precincts and had a long talk. I thought I never saw her look prettier, and she was so kind and affectionate, and such a dear altogether. No wonder your mother and Dorothy are so fond of her.'

'They don't seem able to live without her just now,' he returned in rather a bored tone. 'That is the worst of girls; they are so hot and strong in their friendships. One may have too much even of a good thing.'

'Oh, Craig, how can you be so hard on poor Cicely!'

'I don't think I am hard. Lady Cicely and I are very good friends when we meet; but in my opinion it was a mistake to ask her to Gilnockie just now, and I was awfully glad that her sister's accident prevented her from coming. Neither my father nor I am in the mood for visitors.' And as Joan hardly knew what reply to make to this, she remained silent. It would not do, evidently, to say any more on that subject. She was wondering what she had to tell him next, when Craig suddenly leant forward and took her hand.

'It strikes me that we are wasting precious time

in family gossip which might be far more profitably employed.' Something in his tone put Joan on her guard, and she tried gently to free herself; but his grasp tightened on her wrist.

'Don't worry,' he said coolly. 'I only want you to answer me a question. Joan, were you telling me the truth or a lie when you said in the Brantwood copse that you only cared for me as a dear friend? On your honour, Joan, as between man and man, you must answer me that'—and Craig's blue eyes were stern and determined.

The crucial moment had come and had taken her by surprise; but, though she had tacitly deceived him all these months, she knew that she would rather drop dead at his feet than lie to him. And yet how was she to compromise and evade the difficulty?

'You misunderstood—I never said that,' she returned weakly. Then he looked at her in incredulous astonishment.

'Joan,' he said indignantly, 'how dare you prevaricate to me of all people, when I heard those words with my own ears! Did you, or did you not tell me that you did not wish me to say again that I loved you and wanted you to be my wife? "I really mean it, Craig"—those were your very words, Joan.'

'I do not deny them,' she returned desperately, 'and I spoke the truth when I said that I never wished you to speak to me in that way again. How could I wish to ruin your life! But, Craig, you made one mistake that day, though I thought it better for your sake not to put it right. I never said—how could I?—that I only cared for you as a dear friend. The "only" was your own invention.' Joan said this bravely, though her face was burning and her hands cold as ice. But

as Craig dropped her hands, and with a low exclamation of endearment, would have taken her in his arms, Joan drew back with a gesture that forbade his approach.

'Craig—dear Craig, just listen to me a moment! All these months I have been so unhappy because I dare not let you know the truth, and I could not bear the idea that I was deceiving you.'

'I think you deserved to be unhappy, Joan. I know you nearly broke my heart.'

'Oh, do not speak to me in that tone, as though you were angry with me.'

'But I am angry—righteously angry! I think it was playing a low down game to let me believe what was simply untrue. Even now I can hardly believe it of you, Joan.'

'I wanted to set it right,' she faltered, 'but for your sake and the sake of your people I dared not do it. Craig, can't you understand and forgive me? If you had found out how much I cared, would you have taken my answer?'

'By heavens, no—any more than I take it now!' But again she put her hand up to stop him.

'Wait, I have not finished; there is more that I have to say. Craig dear, whether you forgive me or not, I will go back to St. Breda's Lodge with a lighter heart, because there is no longer this shadow between us, and you know that, though I refused to be your wife, your love was the most precious thing to me on earth.'

'Oh, Joan, my darling, my true-hearted girl!'

'You may call me that for once, and I shall be as proud as though you crowned me. But, Craig, dearly as I love you, nothing will induce me to be your wife.'

'Joan, are you mad? Do you think I shall ever marry any other woman, though she were as rich as Crœsus and as divinely beautiful as a young goddess?' Then a faint smile flitted across Joan's pale face. How sweet it was to hear such words! Could any lover be more perfect!

'I can say nothing as to that,' she returned hurriedly; 'the future is not in our hands, and in the years to come you may see fit to change your mind. There is only one thing of which I am certain —that I will not marry you unless your parents ask me to do so. I will do my duty, Craig, however you may fail in yours.'

And though Craig stormed and argued in his most masterful fashion, making light of her objections and brushing down her girlish theories as easily as though they were ninepins, Joan remained firm to her point. She would love him all her life, but she would never marry him as long as the Merritons opposed the match.

Craig's indignation knew no bounds when he realised that his man's will was set at naught by this girl's obstinacy and adherence to her narrow views of duty. He was on the point of saying something particularly crushing and sarcastic, when Joan, who had been standing hitherto, suddenly dropped into her chair with an air of intense weariness that appealed to his better feelings.

'Oh, Craig, do not make it too hard for me! Even if we cannot agree on this one point, let me at least try and do my duty in peace. Do you think I have not enough to bear as it is?' And one or two tears rolled down her cheeks. 'Oh, my dear, be kind to me even if you think I am wrong!' And the

next minute Craig was kneeling beside her and covering her hand with kisses.

'Forgive me, darling; I was a brute and you are an angel! Now I will not tease you any more, and you shall have your own way for a little.'

'How do you mean?' she asked timidly. Then he rose to his feet with a short laugh.

'Well, we are engaged of course, though it seems I am not to enjoy any of the privileges and prerogatives belonging to such a position. Why, how frightened you look, Joan! But I am speaking words of truth and soberness. When two people love each other as we two do, and own the fact frankly, they have certainly taken each other for better or worse, although their Guardian Angels are the only witnesses.'

Joan, covered with confusion, implored him not to talk so recklessly. 'For you know quite well that I'm not engaged to you,' she said seriously. But Craig, overjoyed at his sweetheart's confession, had taken the bit between his teeth and bolted.

'All right, don't worry. Anyway, I shall tell Aunt Mary that I am engaged to you, and no amount of contradiction on your part will avail. You may refuse to take me for your husband, but you cannot prevent me from being your lover and waiting with what patience I can muster until "the clouds roll by." There, that is my last word, and if you do not say amen to it, that is your look-out, not mine. Now, my good child, do you know we have been talking for two mortal hours, and I am quite faint from emotion and inanition. Do you think your brother and Mrs. Leigh will be kind enough to give me some luncheon?'

Joan rose from her chair with a dazed look: Craig's bold request had nearly taken her breath away.

'I think they will have returned from Huntsmoor by this time,' she replied hesitatingly; 'I had no idea it was so late. Yes, I am quite sure that Heath and Silence will be very pleased to give you luncheon.' Nevertheless Joan grew hot from head to foot at the thought of that embarrassing introduction; but Craig seemed quite at his ease.

'We may as well make tracks for St. Breda's Lodge,' he said quietly. And a moment later they were crossing the sunny green.

CHAPTER XXIX

'A FIGHTING BASTOW'

I count life just a stuff
To try the soul's strength on, educe the man.
Who keeps one end in view makes all things serve.
As with the body—he who hurls a lance
Or heaps up stone on stone, shows strength alike,
So will I seize and use all means to prove
And show this soul of mine you crown as yours,
And justify us both.

BROWNING.

RASCAL'S shrill bark of welcome advertised the arrival of the new-comers; and Canon Leigh, who was just crossing the hall on his way to the dining-room, stood still with surprise at seeing the excited little animal leaping up against a tall young man in evident joyous recognition of an old friend.

Joan accosted her brother rather nervously. 'I saw Lord Josselyn in the Cathedral, Heath; and as I thought you and Silence would be back by this time, I brought him in for some luncheon.'

'I believe I asked myself, Canon Leigh,' annotated Craig in his frank way. 'As your sister and I are such old friends, I thought I might take the liberty.' And there was no want of cordiality in Heath's manner as he assured him of his welcome.

Perhaps the situation was a trifle awkward, but the law of hospitality was certainly paramount at this moment. 'I must introduce you to my wife—I think you have never met,' he said in his pleasantest tone; 'we shall find her awaiting us at the luncheon-table. My love,' as Silence rose in evident surprise, 'this is Lord Josselyn.' Then Silence held out her hand with the grave sedateness which generally concealed her shyness at the unexpected approach of a stranger.

Craig, who had heard a good deal of Mrs. Leigh's idiosyncrasies from Joan, was not in the least repelled by her unsmiling gravity. On the contrary, he was much impressed by her stateliness and fair Madonna face. It pleased him to think that Joan's belongings were so creditable in appearance.

The two elder boys had not yet returned from Winchester, they were expected the following day; but Wanda, with her handsome face and dainty ways, looked to him a thorough little aristocrat, and Jess was always attractive to gentlemen. Joan, who had disappeared to take off her hat and smooth her roughened hair, now returned and took her accustomed seat by her brother. She was thankful that Jess was between her and Craig, and that she could listen to his voice in peace without taking part in the conversation, which was carried on principally between the two gentlemen.

Joan made a poor luncheon, although in reality she was feasting sumptuously. It seemed to her an incredible joy that Craig should be breaking bread in her brother's house. How well he and Heath seemed to understand each other. Perhaps Craig was exerting himself in the hope of impressing them favourably, for she had never heard him talk so well. She noticed,

too, an awakening interest in Silence's quiet grey eyes. She forgot her shyness once or twice in her anxiety that the guest should make a good luncheon.

'I wish every one had made as excellent a meal as I have,' remarked Craig. But his pointed tone made Joan bend over her plate. How could she eat when her heart was so full! No, it was useless making the attempt; she could only empty her tumbler of iced lemonade.

Silence, with true womanly tact, took pity on her at last by rising from the table; but, as Joan and the little girls and Noel joined her, Craig, who had opened the door for his hostess, closed it again and went back to his place.

'I shall be glad to explain matters to you, Canon Leigh,' he said quietly, 'if you are disposed to listen to me.' And as Heath had no objection to offer to this, they were soon engaging in a momentous conversation. Silence looked at her sister-in-law in some perplexity.

'Do you think Prescott had better take the coffee to them there? I thought we should have had it in the garden.' But Joan negatived this with great decision.

'I think Heath would prefer it in the dining-room, there is so little shade anywhere. Silence'—speaking evidently with an effort—'I ought to tell you how it all happened.'

'Yes, dear. Will you mind waiting while I speak to Prescott? Jess, I will not allow you to tease Aunt Joan about playing croquet—no one must think of such a thing before six o'clock. If you have nothing else to do, you and Wanda had better take your books into the kitchen garden; you will find a shady corner there. I won't be a moment, Joan. If you will go into the study

I will join you there, and we shall hear when the gentlemen leave the dining-room.'

Joan rather repented her impulsive speech as she seated herself in the low window-seat. But she felt she owed some explanation to her sister-in-law for bringing in an unexpected guest. So when Silence came back a little flurried with unusual excitement, Joan made room for her with a tolerably good grace.

'I was afraid you and Heath would think it a little odd of me to bring in Lord Josselyn like that, but I really could not help myself,' she began; 'and, as he said at luncheon, he really invited himself.'

'And he was in the Cathedral?' asked Silence curiously.

'Yes, but I was not aware of the fact till the service had begun; he was just opposite to me.'

'Oh dear, how surprised you must have been!'

'Surprise is hardly the right word,' thought Joan. Then she continued hastily:

'He was waiting for me when I came out, and he asked me to take him to some cool, quiet place, as he had a good deal to tell me. So I thought of the library, and as no one was there we were not disturbed.'

'You must have had a good long talk,' remarked Silence with a smile, 'for it was nearly two before you came into the dining-room; but as we were late ourselves it did not matter.'

'I had no idea of the time,' returned Joan frankly, 'until Craig reminded me, and asked if he might come back with me to luncheon, and of course I could hardly refuse.'

'No indeed! and I think it was so nice and friendly of Lord Josselyn to suggest it. Joan, I hope you won't mind my saying how much I like him; he is so pleasant

and simple, and does not stand on his dignity as some young men would do in his position.'

'I am glad you like him, Silence, for you are not at all an easy person to please. And I am sure that you will be sorry to hear that he is troubled because he is obliged to retire from active service. His people refuse to part with him, so he is compelled to make the sacrifice. He talked to me a great deal about it. He doesn't seem to know what he is going to do with himself. You have no idea how devoted he is to his profession.'

'What a pity!' observed Silence thoughtfully. 'Of course I don't see how he could leave his parents under the circumstances, but it certainly seems a little hard on him, poor fellow.'

'It is more than hard,' returned Joan vehemently. 'It was trouble enough for him to lose his brother, and to have to step into his place—the very thing of all others he hates. Craig is rather a democrat at heart, and fuss and ceremony bore him. He wanted to go out into the world, and fight for his country, and see his men in action, and now he will just be a titled loafer, as he calls it; but I told him he must find some congenial occupation.'

'Yes, of course. There is no need for loafing, I should think.'

But Silence looked a little puzzled and disappointed as she said this. They had been together at least two hours and a half in that musty old library. Surely their conversation had not been confined to soldiering. If Lord Josselyn were still in love with Joan he must undoubtedly have made use of so golden an opportunity to propose to her again; but she feared from Joan's manner that she was not to be enlightened on this point. Silence could only make her own deductions.

Something had certainly passed between them. All through luncheon Joan had been shy and silent. She could not remember hearing her voice once. She looked conscious, excited, but not unhappy, and Lord Josselyn seemed fairly cheerful.

If only Joan would believe in her sisterly sympathy and not stint her confidence! It was almost too tantalising. Silence was not at all sure how matters had been settled. If Joan had refused him for the second time, Lord Josselyn had certainly not accepted her decision as final, or he would hardly have eaten so hearty a luncheon and appeared so much at his ease. On the other hand, she did not believe for a moment that Joan would consent to any engagement. Silence sighed with baffled curiosity, but she must wait until her husband made things clear to her; at least Heath never kept anything from her, and this lengthy confab in the dining-room evidently meant business.

Joan was clearly of this opinion; she was growing restless, and seemed listening to every sound. Then she looked at the clock.

'How long they are,' she observed uneasily. 'It is half-past three now, and Craig means to take the 4.20 to town. He wants to get down to Eastbourne to-night; he says his mother will worry if he does not turn up.'

'I don't know what Prescott will think of being kept out of the dining-room like this,' returned Silence, 'and I really must go and fetch my work. There, I can hear them moving. I will just go and tell them we are here.'

But Silence did not return, and the next moment Craig came quickly into the room.

'I have just come to say good-bye, Joan. I have not a moment to spare. Your brother is going to walk

with me to the station—we have not quite finished our talk.'

'Oh, Craig, what have you been telling him all this time?' asked the girl anxiously.

'You had better ask him, dear, for I have no time to explain anything; he told me that he should have a talk with you when he got back. He was awfully jolly, and we got on as well as possible. I have had a rattling good time, and feel more like myself than I have for months—thanks to your confession, sweetheart.'

'Oh, but, Craig, do wait one moment. I want you to promise me that you will not say anything to Lady Mary.' But he only laughed, and there was a determined look in his eyes.

'I shall make no such promise,' he returned firmly. 'You have taken your own line and I must take mine. Don't worry, darling; it will all be right some day. All comes to those who know how to wait, as poor old Clyde used to say, and we are young enough to wait for any number of years.' And then he stooped over her, and his lips just touched the soft, shining hair above her temple; but his touch was so gentle and reverent that Joan hardly felt the caress. Then he smiled at her and hurried away.

Joan sat still in a sort of blissful dream. No one came near her. Not a sound reached the quiet room. The noontide heat had lessened, and the threatened storm had evidently passed away or broken at a distance. A baby breeze was stirring the tree-tops, and a weary, over-burdened bee was sleeping in the heart of a red rose. A sense of prevailing peace, the stirring of some strange visionary hope, seemed to enfold her. 'All comes round to those who know how

to wait'—were not those his words? Joan closed her eyes and tried to think. What had happened? Was she in any way to blame for Craig's masterful tone? Could any girl have spoken more plainly, and yet how had she found courage to say those words?—'Dearly as I love you, nothing will induce me to be your wife.' And again: 'There is only one thing of which I am certain, that I will not marry you unless your parents ask me to do so.' Did such words as these give Craig a loophole for his audacious statement that they were virtually engaged? Joan gave a little sob of happy excitement when she reached this point. 'You know quite well that I am not engaged to you,' she had assured him almost indignantly, but she might as well have spoken to the wind.

Oh, how absurd and wrong-headed he was! Yet could anything be more beautiful and satisfying, more infinitely comforting, than such generous wrong-headedness! Had any girl ever had such a lover! 'Oh, what will Lady Mary say?' was her next thought. 'I shall not have a moment's peace until I explain matters to her, and yet how is such a letter to be written? I must make her understand that I am not to blame because Craig chooses to be masterful. Shall I ever forget the way he looked and spoke?' and Joan hid her flushed face in her hands. When she raised her head again the crimson rose was empty—the tired bee, with its laden honey-bags, was on its way to the hive. A moment later she heard her brother's step outside.

He looked hot and tired, but spoke cheerfully.

'I thought I should find you still here, Joan, so we may as well get our talk over before tea. My dear, your young man has given me a good deal of trouble,

but I am bound to tell you that I consider him a fine fellow'; and Joan was at once aware from Heath's tone that he was exceedingly pleased.

'Did—did he tell you everything?'

'Yes, my dear. He was extremely frank and communicative, and we threshed the whole business out very thoroughly. He told me all that had passed between you in the Cathedral library, he even informed me that you had refused him again; and, under the circumstances, I think you acted very properly. You and I are in a very awkward position, Joan.'

'Do you think I do not realise that, Heath?'

'I am sure you do. And of course, though you and Lord Josselyn have my fullest sympathy, I dared not give him a word of encouragement when he told me that he considered himself engaged to you, and that he intended to tell Lady Mary so. I made him understand that he must do it at his own risk, and that I could not countenance such unpractical and quixotic generosity.

'"I hope you will tell Lady Mary that Joan absolutely refused to listen to you," I said drily; and what do you suppose his high and mighty lordship said in reply? "If your sister refuses me a dozen times it will make no difference. The Bastows are born fighters, and they generally get their way."'

'Oh dear—oh dear!' And then the tea-bell rang; and as there was absolutely nothing more to say, they joined the rest of the family in the dining-room.

CHAPTER XXX

'NONE OF THAT, GOVERNOR!'

It is easy enough to be pleasant
When life flows by like a song,
But the man worth while is the one who will smile
When everything goes dead wrong.
ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

Always laugh when you can; it is a cheap medicine. Merriment is a philosophy not well understood. It is the sunny side of existence.—BYRON.

SILENCE possessed her soul in patience until late in the evening, and until then she exercised a quiet surveillance over her young sister-in-law.

When, during tea-time, Jess renewed her entreaties for Joan to play croquet, Silence magnanimously offered herself in her stead. Joan gave her a grateful look.

When the family had trooped out into the garden, Joan shut herself up in the cool empty drawing-room, with its open windows and great bowls of roses and carnations, and wrote her letter to Lady Mary. It was not an easy task, but it was accomplished at last.

Lady Mary nearly wept over that simple, girlish outpouring.

'Do not blame me more than you can help, for indeed I could not prevent his coming,' wrote Joan.

But she was infinitely comforted by Lady Mary's reply.

'You poor dear child,' she began, 'do you think for one moment that I should think of blaming either you or myself because a reckless, headstrong young man chooses to be self-willed and take his own way in defiance of every one's advice. No, dearest, I am not quite so unjust as that. But of course I think it is a pity that he should upset you in this way. I was very vexed with him; but I am bound to confess that my disapproval made not the slightest impression. "You may say what you like, Aunt Mary," he remarked coolly, "but I don't repent a single word I said." Oh, I could do nothing with him. He did not give me a good account of you, Joan; he says you look pale and thin, and have lost your appetite. I shall be thankful when you are at Revelstoke, for I am certain that the air of St. Breda's is too enervating in the summer. Now, my darling, I want you to put all thoughts of Craig's visit out of your mind as much as possible until we can talk it over quietly together. I am not without hope that I may be able to arrange a meeting later on. At present I cannot get away from Gilnockie, but Lady Merriton is making such good progress that in a few weeks I trust I shall be no longer necessary to her. At the present moment I am afraid to make any definite plans. Now the carriage is coming round, and I must put on my bonnet. God bless you!—Your loving old friend, MARY BOYLE.'

There was only one piece of advice in Lady Mary's letter that Joan found it difficult to follow. How was she to put Craig's visit out of her mind, when from morning to evening she could think of nothing else? It was an undercurrent of sweetness which permeated her daily life. 'You may say what you like, Aunt Mary, but I do not repent a single word I said.' Oh, how perfect he was—what an ideal lover!

When the household had retired to rest that night, Silence betook herself to the study. Both the husband and wife looked forward to this quiet time. Silence was in her white dressing-gown. She had made her rounds amongst her sleeping children. The long heavy plaits of hair shone in the lamplight; the soft muslin frills and folds always suited her.

'I waited until Joan went upstairs,' she said. 'She was unusually late, so I went to the children. I have been longing to talk to you all the evening.'

'And I to you, love,' returned her husband tenderly. 'But I thought perhaps Joan might have forestalled me.' But Silence shook her head.

'She said very little, but of course I saw something had happened.' Then Heath told her what had passed between her and Craig in the Cathedral.

'She really refused him again, and yet any one can see that she is in love with him!' and Silence spoke in an awed voice. 'Oh, Heath, how can she have the heart to do it? In her place I could not have done it.'

'She is very plucky and she has a strong will. But she has met her match, my dear. Lord Josselyn does not intend to give in. He has his back against the wall and means fighting. He told me so very plainly; in fact, he was perfectly frank about it. "I have given in to my father about resigning my commission," he went on, "but I will not allow either him or my mother to dictate to me in the choice of a wife. I will be as free in that matter as the ploughman on my father's farm."'

'Oh, Heath, he was perfectly right, of course. But what answer did you give?'

'I cannot remember the exact words, but I made him understand that I was in an awkward position,

and that, as Joan's brother, I could say nothing to encourage him; that we owed Lady Mary a debt of gratitude; and that sheer honesty obliged me to tell him that he was very deficient in worldly wisdom, and that it would be far better for him to take his family's advice and marry Lady Cicely O'Brien.'

'You actually told him that?'

'Yes; but I saw I had said the wrong thing, for he flushed and drew himself up quite haughtily.

"'It is a pity that any lady's name should be mentioned," he observed. "When I have an opportunity, I intend telling my old friend, Lady Cicely, that I consider myself engaged to Joan. I have a sincere regard for Lady Cicely, and I consider that my mother has placed us both in such a position that I owe her this explanation."'

'How strong he is to stand out against his own people like this! Do you think—do you really think, Heath, that things will come right in time?'

'Oh, my dear, I hardly know what to think, more improbable things have happened.' But Silence was sure from his manner that he was not entirely hopeless. She knew, too, what he had already acknowledged to himself, that he was an ambitious man, and that such a marriage would have added greatly to his sense of importance; and though his conscience forbade him to speak a word of encouragement to the impetuous young lover, he secretly applauded his fidelity.

'It is not because he is heir to an earldom that I think Craig Bastow a fine fellow,' he observed presently. 'Under any circumstances, if he were only the son of a simple country squire, I should be thankful that Joan should have such a husband'—and this was high

praise from Canon Leigh. And then he closed the subject a little regretfully by saying that it was growing very late and that they must not sit up talking any longer.

Joan's spirits improved wonderfully from that day, and she set about making preparation for their flitting with tolerable zest, helping Silence with the children's packing and taking her share of work.

She liked Revelstoke, quiet little place as it was, and the house was delightfully comfortable. Only a little strip of green lay between it and the beach. And after their late dinner it was very enjoyable to wander bare-headed to the edge of the sea, or sit on the shingle in the moonlight and listen to the waves lapping softly on the pebbles. Heath always devoted himself to his boys. They generally bathed early, and then walked over to Thurleigh and spent their mornings boating and fishing. Silence and the little girls sat on the beach. Joan generally gave them her company. Now and then, when the heat was great, they would betake themselves to the Castle garden and sit under the shady trees working or reading.

Joan tried hard to be sociable. Now and then she had a restless fit and went off by herself, but Silence never took any notice. In the afternoon she generally went up to her own room. It had a wide cheerful window overlooking the beach, and here she wrote her letters to Lady Mary or Dorothy, or dreamed idly until the monotonous plashing of the waves lulled her into a sound sleep, which always seemed to refresh her.

One morning Joan and her nieces had established themselves cosily under a breakwater. Silence was paying her weekly bills and intended to join them later on. It was a lovely day. There had been rain

the previous evening which had tempered the intense heat, and there was a refreshing breeze from the sea. The tide was coming in and the soft rhythmic wash of the waves was pleasant in Joan's ears, and her work lay unheeded in her lap as she watched the tiny flecks of foam on the horizon. A boat with white sails seemed to glide out of the distance. Just below them a little group of bare-legged urchins were building a stone fortress. A small Union Jack was fluttering from the parapet, with half-a-dozen tin soldiers to act as sentries.

'This is simply perfect weather,' thought Joan. Then she became aware of an extremely familiar figure coming towards them. A tall, wiry-looking man in a grey summer suit, with a Panama hat drawn over a brown, sunburnt face, and closely followed by a huge, clumsy-footed bulldog.

Jess uttered a joyful exclamation. 'Why, there is our Mr. Trafford, Wanda!' she cried, running to meet him.

Then Dick vaulted over the breakwater, leaving Dagon to scramble over as he best could.

'The domestic told me I should find the young ladies here,' he observed, as he fanned himself with his Panama, 'and that her mistress had gone to the shops.'

'Oh, mother will be here presently,' remarked Jess. 'How hot you and Dagon look, Mr. Trafford.'

'That's so, Miss Jess. If you will excuse me a moment, I will do a little deep breathing at the edge of the sea; my lungs are atrophied for want of air.'

As Jess refused to leave him, they all three went down to the margin of the sea, while the other two watched them with much amusement. Jess's adoration

was so transparent. Dick might snub her quietly as much as he liked, but she remained faithful.

'I think he is quite the nicest man next to father I ever saw,' she said once quite seriously to her aunt, and Joan very naughtily repeated this speech to Dick.

'O Infancy, how blessed is thy ignorance!' returned Dick, with a prodigious sigh. 'Thank you for telling me, Miss Leigh; compliments have been as rare as angels' visits in my well-conducted and lonely existence, and I will lay up the speech in lavender and attar of roses.'

Dick came back to them looking much refreshed, and placed himself between Joan and Wanda, while Dagon selected a sandy bit of shingle, where he curled himself up with his head on Joan's dress—a proceeding which Rascal evidently regarded as a liberty, though, after a war-whoop or two, he decided not to engage in single combat with the unmannerly brute. So he sat in surly jealousy on Joan's frock on the other side, while Dagon winked at him lazily.

'I have come to tell you a piece of news, ladies,' observed Dick, as he sent a round and exceedingly smooth pebble spinning through his fingers. 'I am leaving my P.P.C. card to-day. Dagon and I make tracks to-morrow. Enough is as good as a feast, so they say, and I am sure my Aunt Felicia has had enough of our company.'

'You are going away—oh, Mr. Trafford!' And Jess laid a confiding but slightly grimy hand on the grey coat-sleeve.

'Yes, I am going away, but not where fancy leads me. My mate and I have fallen out on that subject—as the best of friends will sometimes.' And here Dick

looked at his favourite severely. 'Dagon and his master are at loggerheads for once.'

'What do you mean, Mr. Trafford?' asked Wanda curiously, looking up from her sketching-block.

'Well, I will explain matters,' returned Dick with cheerful alacrity. 'I wanted to go to Japan, and probably to Thibet, but my mate vetoed my plan so sternly that I was obliged to relinquish it.

'"None of that, governor!" he returned; "the long voyage would not suit my constitution at all. I should be breaking my heart at one end of the vessel while my lawful master, who promised to be faithful until death us do part, smoked endless pipes at the other."'

'Mr. Trafford,' exclaimed Jess in an extremely shocked voice, 'how can you tell us all that nonsense! Aunt Joan is laughing, but I do not consider it in the least amusing, for only babies think that dogs can talk.'

'You are wrong, Miss Jess,' returned Dick with unusual energy; 'dogs have a language of their own, though few of their human friends understand them as I do. I know exactly Dagon's views on most subjects, and I am only translating them into English for the benefit of my hearers.'

'Oh, I see'; but Jess did not look quite convinced.

'Let me prove the truth of my words. Dagon, old fellow, you are only sleeping with one eye open, so just answer me one question. Did you not insist that your master should give up the idea of going to Japan?' Then, at the word 'Japan,' Dagon uncurled himself and his prominent eyes were fixed uneasily on Dick's face.

'Come, out with it! You did not like the Japs, you said?' Then Dagon uttered a low and despondent growl which seemed to alarm Rascal.

'All right, old chap, we are not going, so you may as well finish your nap.' Then Dagon, with a satisfied 'glump,' laid his heavy head again on Joan's blue cambric.

'He certainly did seem to understand,' she observed; 'but what a pity that your nice plan should be spoiled.'

'Oh, I am always a martyr to my duty,' returned Dick complacently; 'that is why I have such a clear conscience and good digestion. My mate and I are going to the Highlands. A man I once knew in Canada has a berth as keeper, and as he has a decent little shanty with plenty of room in it, he has offered to put us up. I expect I shall make my way to the Orkneys and Shetland.'

'That sounds quite a nice plan,' observed Joan. 'But I think Wanda is waiting to say something.' Then Wanda blushed a little shyly.

'Oh, it was Jessica's thought, not mine; but I should be very willing too, if only mother and father don't mind. Jess wondered if you would like to leave Dagon with us while you went to Japan, Mr. Trafford. We would try and make him happy, and take such care of him. And then you would be free to do as you like.' But as Wanda said this very prettily, the grateful look in Dick's eyes rather surprised her.

'Thank you, Miss Wanda; that was spoken like a true friend—I won't forget that in a hurry. But I dare not accept your generous offer.'

'Why not, Mr. Trafford?'

'Simply because I should find my mate had broken his heart at my desertion and was in his grave, over which his ungrateful master would shed bitter tears of self-reproach. But thank you—thank you all the same. Ah, here comes my lady hostess!' And Dick jumped

up from his recumbent position and assisted Silence over the breakwater.

Dick spent what he called a happy day, and went back by a late evening train, the boys and Jess accompanying him to the station. That night, when Dick found himself alone with Felicia, he said to her in his abrupt way:

'Aunt Felicia, you have always been a good friend to your unworthy nephew—will it interest you to know that I have discovered my orphan?'

'Oh, not really, Dick!'

'Yes, honest Injun; she is all my fancy painted her and a little over. But the only trouble is she is not an orphan.' And with this enigmatical remark Dick gravely bade her good-night and went off, leaving her, as usual, in some perplexity as to his meaning.

'One never knows whether Dick is in earnest about anything,' she said to herself as she put aside her work and extinguished the lamp.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST DAY AT REVELSTOKE

And when on the pathway I faltered,
 And when I rebelled at my fate,
The voice, with assurance unaltered,
 Again spoke one syllable, 'Wait!'
. . . .
The road to the beautiful regions
 Lies ever through Duty's hard way.
Oh, ye who go searching in legions,
 Know this, and be patient to-day.

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

ONE lovely September morning Joan was busily engaged packing up her personal effects as quickly as possible, that she might be free to help Silence and the young people. The boys' holidays were nearly over, and they were leaving Revelstoke the next day, much to every one's regret.

The change had done Joan a world of good. The quiet freedom of their seaside life, with its absence of restraint and routine, had just suited her. Her nerves had recovered their tone; she was no longer languid and listless, and she woke each morning to a sense of renewed hope and enjoyment, to which she had been long a stranger.

Something was always happening. Who could

tell what the day would bring forth? Anyhow, the sun was shining, the waves lapping on the shore, the glorious pageantry of life was daily enacted before her eyes. In spite of sin and pain and aching hearts, and all the follies and mistakes of grown-up children, what a beautiful old world it was! And she was young, and, miracle of miracles, she loved and was beloved! Surely this was enough for the present. Craig no longer misunderstood her—she could trust him, and for the rest—'He holds the key of all unknown,' Joan whispered reverently to herself. 'One can only wait and pray and hope that the way may open.'

Joan worked with a will that morning. She even sang under her breath as she folded her dresses, when a knock at her door startled her, and the parlour-maid brought her a letter. To her surprise she saw it was from Gilnockie.

Another letter from Lady Mary! This was quite unexpected. Joan had heard from her only two days ago. Surely Lady Merriton could not be ill again, she had been so well when Lady Mary last wrote. A vague sense of uneasiness made the girl hesitate to open the envelope. The enclosure was thick too, quite a long letter.

'Oh, what a goose I am,' thought Joan; 'but I felt so cheerful this morning, and——' here Joan refused to listen to any more nervous fancies, and resolutely opened her letter. But she gave a little exclamation of pleasure as she read the opening sentences:—

'I know you will be surprised to hear from me so soon again, dear child, but our plans are all settled now, and I have much to tell you which I know will interest you.

'Craig has just come back from Templeton. He seems to have been very much pleased with his visit. He and his uncle got on famously together, and he begged me to tell you when I next wrote how glad he was that he took your advice, as Lord Templeton had been most helpful and sympathetic. There, for once, dearest, I have broken my rule and given you Craig's message. But I know you will neither of you take advantage of me, and I am so pleased that you advised him to go to Templeton. It has done no end of good all round. That unfortunate little misunderstanding, for which poor Josselyn was to blame, is put right now, and both Lady Templeton and her husband have written in the kindest and most affectionate manner.

'To make a long story short, our time at Gilnockie will be up on Tuesday, and as the doctors do not wish Lady Merriton to return home yet, it is arranged that she and Dorothy are to go to Templeton for a long visit. Craig is to be their escort, but will only remain two or three days, as he has a number of visits to pay. He is going first to Scotland.

'My brother and I are to leave for Brantwood on Wednesday morning. He is to be my guest at Morningside for a week. Can you not imagine how delightful that will be for me, Joan? Besides, how could the poor dear man be left all his lone at the Abbey? I should have had to go to him there, and I am so longing for my own dear little home!

'And now, my darling, I am coming to the best part of my letter. My brother will only stay a week, and then he will join the others at Templeton. I expect he will come backwards and forwards, as there is a good deal to look after; but as he will remain three or four days at a time, he would prefer to stay at the Abbey, though, of course, I shall not allow him to be alone in the evenings.

'And now, my dearest child, you must come to me the very day my brother leaves me. There is no reason in the world why we should not be together and enjoy each other's company for a whole month'—here Joan gave a little incredulous gasp of delight. 'It might even be longer, for we are all so anxious

to keep Lady Merriton away from the Abbey until she is quite strong again, and the Templetons are desirous of having her and Dorothy for as long as possible. But perhaps we must not build on that uncertainty—still, we can be sure of a month. I wish I could see your face, darling, when you read this. I do not think you will refuse my invitation. Tell Heath I must have you for all October, but that I will send you back to him. There, I must not write on. Good-bye until our next meeting.'

How was Joan to finish her packing when she had to read and re-read this delightful letter! Besides, she must answer it at once. What matter if bed and table and floor were strewn with garments, the window-seat was free, and she could scribble hasty, disjointed sentences which spoke of heart gladness in every line!

'To be back with you at dear Morningside for a whole month, dear, dearest Lady Mary, I can hardly believe it yet, though I have read your letter three times. But it seems too good to be realised. Only ten days and we shall be together'—and so on.

'My dear Joan,' it was Silence's voice that roused her—a tired, heated Silence, who looked round at the chaos with reproachful eyes. 'How startled you look! Did you not hear my knock? I have just finished the boys' things, with Prescott's help; but you don't seem to have begun yours, and I was wondering if you had gone out.'

'No, but I was interrupted, and I meant to have helped you so much! I am so sorry, Silence. Never mind my things, I will finish in the afternoon. Come and sit down while I tell you something delightful." And, as Silence amiably complied with this request, Joan unfolded her story.

Silence was not too tired to sympathise. 'I am

very glad, Joan dear,' she said gently, 'that will be a great pleasure both for you and Lady Mary; and I am quite sure Heath will approve, especially as you are to come back to us again.'

Silence's kind voice touched Joan. 'It is nice of you to say that. You are sure that you are not tired of me by this time?'

'Quite sure,' returned Silence, smiling, 'though I never thought to say that. We seem to get on so much better now, Joan, and besides I have been so sorry for you.'

'You have been very good to me, both you and Heath,' returned the girl gravely. 'But I know I have often been extremely trying.'

'Oh no, my dear, you must not say that. You are hardly ever impatient and satirical now, and when you are I can make allowances because you have so much to trouble you.'

'But trouble ought not to make us selfish and horrid to other people, Silence.'

'I am afraid it often does, Joan. But there is the lunch-bell, and we must go down.' But a warm sisterly kiss passed between them before they went downstairs arm-in-arm.

It was natural that Joan's sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks should excite comment; but though Canon Leigh was evidently pleased with Lady Mary's invitation, there were dismayed exclamations from Wanda and Jess, and even Noel.

'You will be away all October, Aunt Joan,' in a regretful tone from Wanda. 'There's an end of our half-holiday sketching expeditions.'

'Must you stay quite so long, Jo dear?' in a coaxing voice from Jess.

'Jess, Jess,' observed her mother in a reproving tone, 'have you forgotten that I told you that aunts must always be treated with respect?'

'Don't I respect you, Jo dear?' continued Jess sweetly. 'Mummie, you are not to be cross the last day. Aunt Joan told me herself that she did not mind my calling her Jo!'

'I think I said Aunt Jo, Bill.'

'Well, Aunt Jo, then. I don't believe, when I am quite grown up and have nephews and nieces of my own, that I shall be so fussy with them. They may call me Bill or little Billie, or even William if they like; when I am an old, old lady they may call me Aunt Jessica.'

'Oh, shut up, Bill!' observed Vere impatiently; 'no one can get in a word edgeways while you are yapping like Rascal at a rabbit-hole. Father, Frank and I want you to come with us for a row, it is such a glorious afternoon.'

'Me too,' observed Noel anxiously. 'Vere, you won't leave me behind?'

'All right, little 'un.' And then magnanimously—'We might take Bill too, if she will promise to sit still and hold her tongue.'

'Oh, Vere, may I steer?' exclaimed Jess eagerly. 'I did last time, and father said he could not have done better himself.'

Here Canon Leigh put up his hand for silence. 'I don't see any reason why your parents and Aunt Joan should be deafened, even if it is the last day,' he observed drily; 'and as I wish to enjoy this excellent mutton, I must insist that the strife of tongues shall cease until the meal is over. I have no objection to your plan, Vere, as long as you do not ask me to exert

myself. You and Frankie can catch as many crabs as you like, and Jess shall steer if she promises to behave herself; and what will Wanda do?' and Heath looked lovingly at his quiet little daughter.

'Oh, I shall help Aunt Joan finish her packing, and then we shall sit in the Castle garden until you all come back.' And this programme was carried out.

Later that evening they all strolled down to the beach. The children, who were in wild spirits, were amusing themselves at the margin of the sea, while Silence and Wanda walked up and down the narrow strip of sand watching them. Canon Leigh, who was a little tired from his boating expedition, had joined his sister. It was one of those soft, mellow September evenings which seem so calm and peaceful. The sun had set, and although there was still a streak of crimson on the horizon, the receding tide looked grey and colourless. Joan, who had taken off her hat to enjoy the fresh sweet breeze, was looking dreamily out to sea.

'I won't say "a penny for your thoughts," my dear,' observed her brother in an amused tone, 'for I know quite well they are at Morningside.'

Then Joan roused herself from her abstraction, but her face was unusually grave.

'You are wrong, dear. That moment when you spoke to me I was remembering my sins. Do you know,' speaking a little fast and nervously, 'there is something I want to say to you. These last few months have taught me much. I know now that it was all my fault that Silence and I did not understand each other better.'

'My dear child, why rake up past troubles?'

'Because it is my duty to tell you this,' she replied seriously. 'How often you have told us in your

sermons that confession is salutary, but I was far too proud to acknowledge my errors. Heath, I don't know why, but I seem to realise things so much more clearly. I see now how trying and provoking I often was to Silence, and all the time she bore it so patiently and never said a hard word to me.'

'She was always very fond of you, Joan, although she failed to understand you. My dear, I am glad, very glad you have told me this; but I do not want you to be hard on yourself. I wonder if you have any idea what a real help and comfort you have been to Silence this summer?'

'Oh no—not really, Heath!'

'Yes, my dear, really and truly; she has told me so herself. Don't you remember our first dinner-party and how grateful she was for your help? And in a dozen other ways you have done her good. My dear wife's shyness is a temperamental difficulty that we can hardly expect to overcome, but I can see some improvement. Did you not notice how she talked to Lord Josselyn that day you brought him in to luncheon? and a tea-party in the Precincts is not nearly such an infliction as it used to be.'

Joan smiled more cheerfully.

'Oh, I am glad you think I have done some good. Indeed, Heath, I am far more fond of Silence than I ever thought I should be, and I hope when I come back at the end of October that I shall be some real comfort to you both.' Then Heath patted the little brown hand very kindly.

'You will have a warm welcome when you do come back, my dear,' he said affectionately. 'Now I must go and send those youngsters indoors.'

Joan sat still with her hands clasped on her knees.

It was growing dark now, but the moon would soon be rising. A star was twinkling over the dark water.

Joan felt at peace with herself and the world. She had made her little confession to Heath and taken her fair share of blame. Now her conscience was clear. Heath was pleased with her; she was no longer a disturbing element in the household. A comforting sense of brotherhood and well-being stole over her; perhaps, after all, she had not done so badly this summer. 'Lady Mary will be glad when I tell her—she always took Silence's part and thought I was hard on her. Dear Lady Mary, she is a born peacemaker.' And then Joan gave herself up to blissful anticipations of her visit.

CHAPTER XXXII

'GOLDEN OCTOBER'

The larches' hair is golden now,
 They stand in groves of springing flame;
Behind them, dark in leaf or bough,
 The fir woods stretch their mighty frame.

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Ah yes! this rich autumnal gold
 Is only sunshine in decay;
But age, forlorn and sad and cold,
 The porch of life, the gate of day!

London Spectator.

IT was quite early on a lovely autumnal afternoon when Joan came out of the station at Atherton, where Lady Mary's barouche and pair of beautiful chestnut horses were awaiting her. Joan was quite aware that she was not to be met. Lady Mary had told her in her last note that she would prefer receiving her at Morningside, and Joan had not been the least disappointed. The solitary drive was full of pleasure to her, as her eyes traced each familiar landmark. How sweet and fragrant the air was! The hop-fields were bare, but somewhere they were burning weeds, and the strong, pungent odour seemed delightful to her.

Ah, the road was dipping down now and the trees were nearly meeting overhead—they were entering the

Brantwood copses. How still and peaceful they looked in the mild sunshine of the October afternoon—'golden October' as Lady Mary often called it! Some of the trees were still green, but in less sheltered nooks the blending of pale yellowish and russet tints with brown and faded crimson made the woodlands a glory of colouring; and on the pathway lay heaps of fallen leaves, which rustled crisply under the feet of the passer-by. Ah, there was the little gate which led to her favourite copse, where she and Rascal had spent that long, sorrowful morning. Why, even Rascal seemed to recognise it, for his little white body quivered with excitement as he sat beside her in the carriage.

'Hush, Rascal, surely that is a robin's note! This is the robin's month, I know.' And Joan softly repeated to herself fragments of those beautiful lines in the *Christian Year*:—

> Unheard in summer's flaring ray,
> Pour forth thy notes, sweet singer,
> Wooing the stillness of the autumn day.

And again:

> But none so blends,
> As thine
> With calm decay, and peace divine.

Joan's heart beat faster now. In another minute they would reach the gate leading to Brantwood Abbey. Ah, there on her left hand was the view she loved so well—the sunny water-meadows, with the stream and mill, and small rustic bridge, the sleepy cattle, and background of red-boled Scotch firs, their bluish-green foliage contrasting with the fading yellow of the elms.

Joan bent forward eagerly as they turned the

corner. Yes, there was Morningside, with its stables and garden wall, one crimson glory from the Virginian creeper that covered them. On the house itself, only a few late roses still bloomed. But from the archway that led to the garden there hung blood-red persimmons in ragged festoons, which seemed to feast the eyes with their glowing loveliness. As the carriage turned in at the gate, Lady Mary's tall figure appeared in the porch, and the next moment Joan had sprung to the ground and was folded in her arms.

'Welcome home, my darling!' said the low fond tones that had been unheard so long. But a little choking sensation in the girl's throat prevented her from answering. Had she only been away five months! —five months of heart- and home-sickness. It seemed at least a year, but the sweetness of this moment made up for much.

'Come into the drawing-room, dearest, while they bring in your luggage.' Lady Mary's caressing hand still rested on Joan's arm. As she moved, that faint familiar fragrance, like far-off roses, which always pervaded Lady Mary's laces came in a delicious whiff to the girl. Lady Mary had an old-fashioned passion for attar of roses, and Joan had always loved it for her sake.

'Oh, the dear room!' she exclaimed joyfully; 'I think it looks lovelier than ever. But I miss poor old Cocker dreadfully.' For Lady Mary's old favourite had died peacefully during his mistress's absence, of extreme old age, and a small tombstone in the kitchen garden recorded his age and virtues. After tea, Joan took Rascal to visit it.

Lady Mary shook her head with a sigh at the mention of Cocker. 'The house felt so empty without

him and you, Joan,' she returned sadly. 'When the door opened, I did so miss his wheezy bark. If my brother had not been with me, I don't know how I should have got through the first evening, but of course I had to exert myself for his sake. I do not think,' she continued thoughtfully, 'that it is wrong to grieve for a dumb creature who has been a faithful friend for sixteen years. He was quite a young dog when my dear Sir Martin brought him to Roskill Priory, and I loved him from the first moment. He was almost as playful as your little Rascal, but more gentle. Ah, well! we will not talk of Cocker this evening.' But Lady Mary sighed again as Joan kissed her, for the loss of her favourite had been a sore grief.

Willis's entrance with the tea made a diversion, and the pleasure of seeing Joan in her old place at the tea-tray banished all melancholy reflections. Lady Mary smiled happily when Joan, disdaining the very notion of fatigue, waited on her in her old way. She could have fancied that her tea that afternoon had a better flavour because Joan had poured it out.

'You are looking so well, dear child,' she observed. 'Revelstoke has certainly done you good, for I had rather poor accounts of you.' Then Joan coloured, for she knew who had been Lady Mary's informant.

'I am not quite sure that I can return the compliment,' she replied, with a reproving shake of the head. 'The strain and worry of those weeks at Gilnockie have been too much for you.' And Lady Mary could not honestly deny this.

'Oh, I shall be able to rest now,' she observed hastily.

Joan felt vaguely dissatisfied with her friend's

appearance. Lady Mary looked far more worn and weary than she had ever seen her. She had never yet appeared her age, but now there were faint lines under the sweet, tired eyes, and the hair seemed greyer, though the little point lace Mary Stuart caps which Lady Mary usually wore somewhat concealed this. But what distressed Joan most was to see how loose the sapphire and diamond rings were on the slender fingers. Lady Mary had beautiful hands and was quite aware of the fact. It was one of her innocent vanities to enhance their beauty by ruffles of priceless lace. A faint, delicate flush came to her face as Joan mutely pointed to them.

'Now, Joan, don't begin worrying yourself about such trifles,' and Lady Mary spoke with an assumption of playfulness. 'What does it matter if I am a little thinner? No, I don't deny it; besides, Dunlop never lets me forget it for a day. But you see, in spite of the excellent sea air and daily drives, life at Gilnockie was a little wearing.'

'Do you think I don't know that!' returned Joan in a distressed tone. 'All these months I have been anxious about you. Your headaches were more frequent; Dorothy told me so; and I knew they were all tiring you out.'

'No, no, darling, you must not exaggerate. They were all so good to me—Dorothy was quite devoted—but while Lady Merriton was in that nervous condition none of us had much rest.'

'Yes, but the strain fell principally on you. Oh, I know all about it. You sent Dorothy out day after day, and took her share of attendance on the invalid as well as your own. It was just like your unselfishness, and now you are suffering from the

strain.' But though Lady Mary could not contradict this, she was anxious to remove Joan's uneasiness.

'You know, my dear,' she returned cheerfully, 'when people are not young they soon show signs of strain and fatigue; and you must remember that I shall be fifty-six this month.'

'What of that,' indignantly, 'when every one says you look ten or fifteen years younger!'

'You have not let me finish my sentence, naughty child! When life is peaceful, and there are no frets and troubles, people often look younger than their actual age; but with prolonged worry or fatigue, or wearing troubles—and we have had all this for months—one needs the elasticity of youth and its powers of recuperation. I feel a little tired and old, that is all.' But to Lady Mary's surprise there were actual tears in the girl's eyes.

'How am I ever to leave you again, when you need me so!' she murmured. Then Lady Mary smoothed her hair caressingly.

'Hush, Joan, we won't cross the bridge before we come to it! We are going to be very happy, you and I, for four weeks, and not worry ourselves about the future.'

'And you will get better and stronger?'

'Of course I shall; and you must help me by letting me see your dear face look bright again. How we shall enjoy our evenings, Joan! And, in spite of our long letters, how much we shall have to tell each other about Gilnockie and St. Breda's Lodge! Now, I expect Dunlop will have unpacked your things. Would you like to go up to your room now, or wait for the dressing-bell?'

'I would rather wait, if you do not mind. But I

am not going to talk to you any more just now; Rascal and I are going to explore a little before it gets dark.'

And Lady Mary smiled assent, as she seated herself in her easy-chair and watched lovingly the graceful figure cross the lawn with Rascal frisking round her. They were on their way to Cocker's grave, as Lady Mary was fully aware.

'Dear child,' she said to herself, 'she is looking better than I ventured to hope. Craig's account made me quite anxious—thinner, out of spirits, and not like her old self. I know his description quite worried me. But I expect Heath was right when he said the great heat was trying her. I daresay Craig's visit, wrong as it was, did her good. Dear! dear! how will it all end?' and Lady Mary sighed wearily, for she was just in that overtasked state of mind and body which makes it so difficult to keep depression at bay.

Joan was Lady Mary's ewe lamb. Every year the child of her adoption had grown dearer to her; and she knew that, whether they spoke of it or not, the thought of the approaching winter pressed heavily on them both.

'I wonder if George and Hildegarde realise how hard it is on me?' she thought. 'Craig does; I can see it in his eyes. "I am so awfully sorry for you, Aunt Mary," he said that last evening, "but I mean to put a stop to this state of things before long." Now I wonder what he meant by that?'

Later that evening, when dinner was over, Lady Mary and Joan settled themselves for a long, unrestrained talk.

As usual, a bright little fire burnt cheerily, and Rascal had curled himself up on the white rug that had

been poor old Cocker's favourite resting-place. The shaded rose-coloured lamps cast a subdued, pleasant glow over the room, and the perfume of hothouse flowers from the Brantwood conservatories mingled with the woody fragrance of the pine-knots with which Willis had filled the grate.

When they had drunk their coffee, Joan drew a large square stool close to Lady Mary's easy-chair and seated herself comfortably.

'No, you are not to work,' she said in a coaxing voice, as Lady Mary was about to take up her knitting. 'We must do nothing but talk, talk, talk of anything that comes into our heads, and when you are tired I shall be quite content to watch those delicious blue-green flames, and to realise that I am by "my ain fireside" again. To-morrow I will play and sing to you as much as you like, but not to-night.' And Lady Mary smilingly assented to this programme.

It was not Joan who first mentioned Craig's name.

'Nothing shall induce me to speak of him this evening,' she had said to herself as she went down-stairs. 'I will tell Lady Mary about Silence and the children; she will love to hear about them.'

But all Joan's good resolutions vanished into thin air when Lady Mary quietly commenced the conversation by asking what Heath thought of Craig.

'Oh dear!' was all Joan could say the first moment, but she flushed to the roots of her hair.

'We may as well get it over,' went on Lady Mary calmly; 'we shall both feel more comfortable afterwards. Letters tell so little, and I can't take Craig's version of his visit. Tell me everything from the beginning, dear child.' And after this Joan needed no further bidding.

Oh the relief of pouring it all out into the sympathising ear! There was no listener to compare with Lady Mary. She never interrupted or broke the sequence of a narrative unless she absolutely needed to have some point made clearer, and her silent interest never flagged. If Joan paused or seemed embarrassed, a brief word of encouragement or a mute caress gave her fresh impetus. But not until the story was finished, and Joan had hidden her glowing face against her friend's black gown, was Lady Mary's soft voice really heard.

'Yes, I can see it all now,' she said quietly. 'And I can only repeat what I said in my letter, Joan, that you are not to blame for what has happened. You did your best, you poor child. And Craig was bound to find out the truth sooner or later.'

'But I cannot help being glad that he knows the truth!' Then a sweet flickering smile broke over the care-worn face.

'You are only human, Joan, and the counsel of perfection is not easy. If we poor women try to do our duty, and ask for daily strength to meet daily trials in a right spirit, that is all our Guardian Angel will require.'

'Dearest Lady Mary, there is no one who says such nice, comforting things as you do,' and Joan rested her fresh young cheek against the thin, blue-veined hand; 'but I never thought life could be quite so difficult.'

'Yes, but it is not your fault, darling. Craig's last escapade has only added to the complication. I wonder if the foolish boy realises that he has made it more impossible than ever for you to be here? Well, we will not talk about that,' as a shade

crossed the girl's face. 'I will promise you one thing, that we will not be separated for another five months if I can prevent it. There are ways and means, and we will arrange something.' And with these cheering words Lady Mary closed the conversation.

CHAPTER XXXIII

'A LITTLE CORNER OF PARADISE'

> The leaf presents to God its finished story,
> Receiving at His hand its meed of glory;
> And floating gently down, with mission ended,
> Moulders beneath the bough its life defended.
>
>
>
> Yet are we slow to learn that death is glorious
> Only to those who rise o'er self victorious;
> Only to those who find the bliss of living
> In ever, like the leaf, receiving, giving.
>
> NELLIE M. ARNOLD.

THEY were very happy those two, and Joan's only complaint was that the days passed far too quickly. In the mornings, when Lady Mary interviewed her factotum, Mrs. Hartley, or was busy with necessary letters and accounts, Joan and Rascal revisited all their old haunts. They even wandered in the Abbey woods and meadows. During the rest of the day she and Lady Mary were inseparable. They walked or talked or took long drives, and during the evenings Joan played and sang or read aloud after their usual peaceful fashion.

It was pleasant to see how Lady Mary's worn spirits revived in her favourite's society. The tired, harassed expression was less visible. She ceased to

brood over the trying scenes which had sapped her strength far more than any one knew. She slept better and enjoyed her food, and Joan rejoiced to see the improvement. To her surprise, even Dunlop seemed glad to have her back.

'It will never do for you to stay away like this again, Miss Joan,' she said severely. 'They nearly killed my lady between them. If it had lasted much longer, we should have had her on a sick-bed. Night after night, it would be twelve or one o'clock before she came to her room, because her ladyship would not be left. Why, I have seen my mistress so exhausted that she hardly had strength to creep to her bed. And many the morning she has said to me, "I have been too tired to sleep, Dunlop." But there, do you suppose her ladyship took any heed!' For Dunlop, like many other good people, could not realise the sufferer's powerlessness of will when in the grip of nervous illness, and nothing would ever have convinced her that Lady Merriton had not been selfish and exacting in her grief.

'I am afraid I shall have to go back to St. Breda's,' returned Joan sadly. She was quite sure that Dunlop fully understood the position of affairs, although no word had ever passed between her and Lady Mary.

'Then you must take the consequences, Miss Joan,' replied Dunlop grimly, as she carried off an armful of lace frills to her work-room.

One morning, when Lady Mary was unusually busy, Joan and Rascal went over to Herondale. Prudence Rutherford had only just returned from Scotland, and had not yet appeared at Morningside.

As Joan wanted a long walk and only intended to pay a short visit to the Rectory, she determined to

take the longer round by Sudlow Hill. The sandstone road lay deep amongst the firs, and in the sunshine the air was laden with the delicious aromatic scent of the pines. A little higher up there was a sort of ravine with banks on either side; winding walks stretched in all directions, bordered by golden-brown bracken and the dull crimson of brambles. Nature seemed preparing the funeral feast of the slowly dying year. As yet the frost had not touched the oaks, but the larches and limes were shedding golden rain on Joan's hat, and Rascal bounded with shrill barks of delight over the crisp heaps of the fallen leaves. The silence, the stillness, the tempered sunlight slanting between the tree-boles seemed to intoxicate Joan with new delight. 'Oh, could Paradise be more beautiful than this!' she thought. 'Surely the new earth will be something like this! One could almost imagine those little clouds were angel wings.' But Joan smiled at her own fancies as she rose from the mossy bank. She was almost sorry when her walk was nearly over and she came in sight of the village green and the little river spanned by its bridge. Five minutes later she stood in the Rectory porch. As Rascal uttered one of his war-whoops at the sight of a small black-and-white kitten scaling the trellis-work of an arch, Prudence Rutherford came out of the kitchen in her favourite old white sun-bonnet with a basket of eggs on her arm.

'Why, Joan,' she exclaimed delightedly, and her plain face beamed welcome, 'what a sight for sore e'en!' and she hugged her.

'Are you going out, Prudence? Do let us sit down in the porch for a few minutes. I cannot stay more than half-an-hour. I only came over for the walk and to bring you a message from Lady Mary. I

have been all round by Sudlow Hill. When I smelt the pines, I thought I was in a little corner of Paradise, and that the angels had just lighted up their lamps—the sweet, spicy odour always reminds me of incense.'

'You romantic little person! I must tell Morven that. If you have walked all those miles you must be tired and thirsty. Shall I bring you some cider or a glass of milk?'

'Oh, cider, please. But do wait a moment, Prue. I have to give you Lady Mary's message. She wants you and Mr. Rutherford to dine with us to-morrow; it will be one of our old quartette parties.'

'Oh, I am quite sure that Morven will be delighted to come; he has gone over to Aldershot, and will not be back until late in the afternoon; but I know I can answer for him, for to-morrow will be a free day, and at breakfast this morning he suggested our walking over to Morningside; we both so wanted to see you, Joan, and I have not set eyes on Lady Mary for six or seven weeks. Now sit down, and I will be back in a moment.'

The porch seat was low and deep, and Joan settled herself comfortably. Rascal was still barking himself hoarse at the foot of the trellis-work, and the kitten watched him with benevolent interest from the top. Prudence soon returned with a tempting little tray—a glass tankard filled to the brim with sweet yellow cider and some brown buns fresh from the oven.

Joan shared her luncheon with Rascal.

'I suppose you were going to take those eggs to some poor sick body, Prudence?' And her friend nodded.

'Yes, to Rachel Blackburn. We have been so

anxious about her. Her baby is not a week old, and poor Rachel is so ill. We don't think she has been properly nursed. Her mother-in-law is a feckless sort of body, and we are afraid that she has neglected the poor young thing. I was there most of the night on Friday, for Dr. Harrison thought so badly of her. Morven went off to Atherton the next morning, and sent in a nice woman who had been a hospital nurse before she married, and both mother and child are improving now.'

Joan listened to this account with unfeigned interest. Rachel had been a favourite of hers. She had been the village beauty before she married Steeve Blackburn, the handsome young wheelwright, who had courted her from a child; and she had been under-housemaid at the Abbey for two or three years, and Joan knew that Lady Dorothy had promised to stand sponsor to Rachel's first child. Joan had a host of questions to ask Prudence about Susan Bennet and her own old Sunday scholars; and they were presently so deep in parochial gossip that the half-hour had long elapsed before Joan bethought herself that she would be late for luncheon.

'I will walk with you as far as the Blackburn's cottage,' observed Prudence, 'if you are not ashamed of my old sunbonnet. We have been so busy parishing that I have not heard any of your news, Joan. By the bye, I had a long letter from Dorothy this morning.'

'So had Lady Mary. She has not written so cheerfully since her brother's death. She says her mother improves every day, and that her Aunt Miriam is so good to them, and that she wants them to stay as long as possible.'

'She said much the same in my letter. I am quite sure this visit to Templeton will do them both a world of good.'

'That was what Lady Mary said this morning. Lady Templeton has always been fond of Dorothy. Did she mention those new friends of hers at the Park?'

'Do you mean Viscount Helmore and his family? Yes, indeed. Dorothy seems to have taken a fancy to the girls. She says Violet and Bee, two younger ones, are charming, so natural and unsophisticated, but she seems most interested in the eldest daughter, Orma, who is an invalid.'

'Dorothy seems to have taken one of her impulsive likings for this Orma,' returned Joan. 'Don't you remember our telling her once that she always cared most for people who had something the matter with them, and she did not deny it?'

'No; but this Orma seems rather sweet, Joan. Dorothy says that though she is so young—not more than nineteen—she is like a little mother to her sisters, and they are so devoted to her. It does seem such a sad case. It is hip disease in rather an aggravated form, and the doctor can do so little for her. At times she suffers a great deal, and cannot even move from her wheeled chair or couch, but she is so wonderfully patient. The nurse, who was her foster-mother, devotes herself entirely to her, and she has a lovely sitting-room opening out from her bedroom on the ground floor.'

'Dorothy did not tell Lady Mary all that,' observed Joan, 'because she knew that she would rather hear about Lady Merriton. But she said she went frequently to Helmore Park, and that her Aunt Miriam was so

fond of young people that she encouraged the girls to run in and out. They have no mother, you know; she died when Bee was only five.'

They had reached the Blackburn's cottage by this time, and Joan looked up at the small lattice-window, with its snowy curtains, and thought of the young mother who had only just emerged from the valley of the shadow of death.

'Give my love to Rachel,' she said. 'I should like to come and see her and the baby as soon as she is well enough.'

'That will not be just yet,' returned Prudence regretfully. 'It is very sad to see that handsome girl looking like a shadow; she has hardly strength to speak or lift her hand. Morven had to baptize the child that first day. As it is a boy, Steeve gave him his father's name, Nathaniel. There are always a Stephen and a Nathaniel in the Blackburn family, and Steeve adhered to the old custom.'

'When I tell Lady Mary about Rachel, she and Mrs. Hartley will put their heads together, and all kinds of delicious soups and jellies will be made for the invalid.'

'Don't we know our Lady Bountiful?' returned Prudence, smiling. 'Morven sometimes declares Lady Mary will pauperise the village. Don't you remember, Joan, when little Nora Goldhurst made that funny speech to her mother: "Can't I be ill again soon, mummie, and have some more of the curranty jelly and barley-sugar drink which made my sore chest well?"' And then they both laughed and parted.

'To be continued in our next,' observed Joan gaily, as she waved her hand. But Prudence did not at once unlatch the little gate; she was watching the

girl's graceful walk as she sped swiftly up the sunny road.

'I never told her that I saw Craig before I left Scotland,' she said to herself. 'But perhaps it was just as well; she might have asked me where he was staying, and then perhaps she would have found out that he and Lady Cicely are under the same roof. Silence is golden under some circumstances.' And then Prudence took up her egg-basket again and let herself into the cottage.

The quartette party was a great success. Morven Rutherford was always a delightfully genial guest, and the conversation never flagged when he was present. His holiday had been spent in the Austrian Tyrol, and his description of the primitive customs of some of the remote villages was wonderfully interesting. He fairly thrilled Lady Mary and Joan by his account of a night's adventure as they were crossing the mountains. They lost their guide and their way, and they had to grope their way in the darkness to a place of safety, where they had to remain nearly frozen until dawn.

On their return to the drawing-room, Mr. Rutherford questioned Joan a little curiously about Dick Trafford.

'Dick's an erratic fellow,' he said; 'he is quite a modern edition of the Wandering Jew. I am quite aware that he is in Scotland at the present moment, for I have had three exceedingly brief letters. Dick's favourite axiom is that in correspondence "brevity is the soul of wit," for he seldom favours me with more than four or five lines. I can give you a specimen from memory:—

Yours to hand. Thanks awfully. Hope you are as fit as your humble servant, RICHARD TRAFFORD.

My dutiful respects to your sister.'

'Oh yes, I know,' laughed Joan; 'but he does not abbreviate his conversation. I have heard him hold forth for about five minutes without a break, but he is never prosy.'

'Oh no, prosiness is not one of Trafford's failings.'

'We all think him so amusing,' went on Joan. 'We saw a great deal of him and that nice aunt of his, Mrs. Ramsay, at St. Breda's; and he came over two or three times to Revelstoke. My nieces are quite devoted to him and Dagon.'

'Your nieces?' tentatively, and it was evident that Mr. Rutherford was interested.

'Yes, Wanda and Jess. Jess's devotion is quite a touching thing to see—she follows him about like a little dog.'

But at this moment Lady Mary broke in upon their talk by asking Joan to sing to them, and she went at once to the piano. Later that evening, when the Rutherfords had taken their departure, Joan, who was kneeling on the rug for a final warm before retiring to bed—for the October evenings were beginning to be chilly—said suddenly in her impulsive way:

'Do you know, I often wonder why Mr. Rutherford has never married.'

'I have heard many people say the same,' returned Lady Mary, smiling.

'I remember Dorothy told me once that during his mother's lifetime he was not at all well off. But since then Prudence and he have both had money left them, and she said they were quite comfortable now. He is such a splendid man, and it seems such a pity that he should not have a nice wife. I asked Dorothy if he advocated the celibacy of the clergy, and she said

certainly not, and that she had heard him say more than once that a country rector was better married.'

'I daresay Prudence could tell us the reason, Joan.'

'Oh, do you think he has cared for some one?' exclaimed the girl curiously, for Lady Mary's tone was a little mysterious.

'I should not be surprised,' returned her friend quietly; 'I have always fancied that there was some trouble in the background. Perhaps he loved some one who did not return his affection, or perhaps the woman he wanted was above him in rank. Why do you look at me like that, Joan? This is purely guesswork, I know nothing for certain.'

'I thought for the moment you meant Dorothy,' returned Joan in a startled tone. But Lady Mary shook her head.

'Our demure, gentle little Dollie? What an idea, Joan! They are very much attached to each other, but I am quite sure that Mr. Rutherford is not in love with her. But Dorothy has charming friends, and he may have met his fate at the Abbey.'

'He admires Lady Cicely,' observed Joan, 'every one does, but he never seems to take any special notice of her.'

'Oh, I am quite sure it is not Lady Cicely,' in an amused voice.

'Then it might be her cousin, Lady Marjorie,' exclaimed Joan shrewdly; 'she used to stay so much at the Abbey, and now she never comes.' But Lady Mary refused to say any more on the subject.

'I don't think we ought to try and find out our friends' secrets unless they give us their confidence,' she observed gently but firmly; 'it never seems to me quite honourable. Most lives have their secret chambers and

hidden mysteries, and why not Morven Rutherford's? but it is not for us to pry curiously into them'; and though Lady Mary said no more, she had a strong suspicion that Joan's arrow at a venture had grazed the truth.

CHAPTER XXXIV

'IT IS RATTLING GOOD NEWS!'

Whichever way the wind doth blow,
Some heart is glad to have it so;
Then blow it east, or blow it west,
The wind that blows, that wind is best.
CAROLINE A. MASON.

Those who bring sunshine to the life of others cannot keep it from themselves.—J. M. BARRIE.

DURING the following week Lord Merriton paid one of his flying visits to the Abbey. Joan, who had not seen him since she had left Morningside in the spring, was inclined to be rather shy and reserved with him at first; but as the Earl treated her with his old kindness, and seemed to take pleasure in her company, these uncomfortable feelings soon disappeared. They had always been good friends, and in the old days he had paid her little fatherly attentions, inviting her to ride with him and Dorothy. Joan was a famous equestrian and never looked to more advantage than on horseback, so he had often asked her to accompany him to some outlying farm when Dorothy was tired or busy, and on these occasions Joan had proved herself an excellent companion.

Joan, who was sincerely attached to every member

of the Merriton family, was very grateful for the Earl's kindness. When Lady Mary dined at the Abbey, to keep him company during the long evening, he insisted that the girl should accompany her.

Joan was perfectly willing to go. She knew exactly when to efface herself. When they had taken their coffee she would steal away to the music-room, and play or sing one song after another. Now and then the brother and sister would break off their low-toned talk to listen to the fresh girlish notes which rang through the big empty rooms. One evening Lord Merriton looked at his sister rather wistfully. 'I think she seems happier, Mary,' he said, and Lady Mary had not the heart to undeceive him; she could read his unspoken thought: 'She is young, they are both so young that they will soon get over it. How few men, or women either, marry their first love? Neither Hildegarde nor I did, and yet no wedded couple could be happier.' He had said this more than once to her, and she knew it was in his mind now.

Once, when Joan was playing some sweet plaintive melody, Lord Merriton asked his sister rather abruptly how long Joan would remain at Morningside.

'That depends on circumstances,' she returned pointedly. 'As you may imagine, I am very unwilling to part with her; but when Hildegarde comes home I think it will be better for Joan to go back to St. Breda's Lodge. One can never be sure of Craig's movements; but the winter will be very dull without her.'

'What a confounded nuisance the whole business is!' returned the Earl testily. 'It does not seem fair that you should be subjected to all this inconvenience. I hate to think of your having to do without Joan this

winter, and yet I don't see how you are going to keep her.'

'Neither do I,' returned Lady Mary quietly. 'But don't worry about it, George; I daresay I shall find some way of solving the difficulty. Perhaps I shall make a break for once and spend a few weeks at Torquay. Joan could come to me there, or I could have her up for a week now and then when the coast is clear.' Lord Merriton only shook his head with a sigh.

'You are very good about it, Mary, but all the same it troubles me that you should be deprived of your companion.'

'In this world one has to suffer for one's mistakes,' returned his sister.

'But you have made no mistake, my dear!'

'I am afraid I have, George, though you and Hildegarde are too kind to tell me so. If I had not brought Joan to Morningside, none of this difficulty would have arisen. Do you know, the idea of one of your boys falling in love with her never entered my head. We none of us considered her pretty enough to be a dangerous attraction. Don't you remember how poor Arthur called her "the red-headed girl"?'

Lord Merriton looked a little grave at the mention of his son.

'Yes, I remember. But I have changed my mind a bit on that subject. I was only thinking this evening that there is something very taking about the girl. She is no beauty, of course, but with her slim young figure and that wonderful hair of hers shining like spun silk in the lamplight—Arthur was wrong about the colour—one could fancy a young fellow losing his head over her.' Lord Merriton had never said as

much before, and Lady Mary was much gratified by his speech.

Her brother's visit had cheered her greatly. He had brought nothing but good news from Templeton Park. On the last evening, when they went up to the Abbey, and Joan had again wandered off to the music-room, Lord Merriton was even more communicative than usual.

'Templeton and his wife are awfully hospitable. I think they would be willing to keep us the whole winter. That good soul Miriam said to me quite seriously, the morning I came away, "Now, Merriton, you must let me keep Hildegarde and Dorothy as long as possible. Hildegarde is recovering her tone more every day. It would be unwise to hurry matters, and I love to have them. You can go backwards and forwards as much as you please, and your sister will look after you."'

'I should take Lady Templeton's advice, George. Dorothy, too, seems very happy with her aunt.'

'You would say so if you saw her. Dollie is having a grand time in her own quiet way. The Helmore girls are always about the place, and she and Hildegarde are always driving over to the Park to see the invalid. Hildegarde seems to have taken a fancy to her too.'

'Yes, it all sounds delightful. Then you will be coming up again, George?'

'In about ten days or so. I shall probably take the inside of a week. By that time we shall know more of Craig's movements. By the bye, Mary, I never told you that Templeton is doing him a good turn. He has advised him to join the Yeomanry, and has offered to introduce him to the Colonel, who is a friend of his.

He says he can find plenty of work for an active young officer; so there is no need for his loafing round, as he expresses it.'

'No, indeed, and I was sure something would turn up. Craig is not the sort of man to remain long idle; he is certain to find plenty of interests.'

'I believe we have to thank Joan for this,' returned Lord Merriton slowly. 'Craig told his mother before he left that he had been to St. Breda's and seen the girl, and that she had given him a lot of good advice, and recommended him to talk to his uncle. Craig's pertinacity about the girl worried Hildegarde a good deal, but Miriam advised her to take no notice. Anyhow, Craig has taken his uncle's advice and means to join the Yeomanry as soon as possible.'

The Earl had unconsciously raised his voice, and perhaps this was the reason why neither of them heard Joan's light footstep until she was close to them. And so it was the last few words reached her ears—'Craig has taken his uncle's advice and means to join the Yeomanry as soon as possible.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' she said a little breathlessly, but her eyes were very bright, 'I did not mean to interrupt you; I will go back to the music-room.' But Lord Merriton would not allow this; no more kind-hearted man ever lived, and with all his hereditary pride he had an Englishman's sense of fairness.

'We are not talking secrets, Joan. I was only just telling my sister that Templeton has advised Josselyn to enter the Yeomanry, and that he seems to take very kindly to the idea.'

'Oh, I am so glad!' replied Joan simply. And indeed she looked very happy. 'Lady Mary, I heard

the carriage coming, and it is getting quite late.' Then the elder lady rose at once.

'We must go now, George, but you will come and see me in the morning before you go back to Templeton?' And Lord Merriton promised that he would turn up without fail. He would have liked to have said a word to Joan to show her that he appreciated her sensible advice to Craig, but on second thoughts he determined to say nothing; the less Craig's name was mentioned the better. But Joan, on her part, did not attempt to conceal her pleasure from Lady Mary.

'I do think it was so nice of Lord Merriton to tell me that. He really is an old dear!'

'He is certainly very fond of you, Joan. He is always saying something pretty about you.'

'Oh, he does that to please you, dear; but all the same I wanted to hug him this evening. You know I always used to kiss him until I was in long frocks.'

Lady Mary smiled. 'You see he wants to be kind to my adopted daughter.'

'There, I must kiss you now, for it is so sweet of you to call me that. I mean to sign myself "your loving child" in my next letter. Oh dear, I do feel so joyful to-night, and it is all because that poor boy will not be utterly cut off from his soldiering. He will keep his horses and ride about and drill his men, and though it will be play-work to him after Aldershot, it will give him something to think about. Oh, how glad I am that that idea jumped into my head!'

'Yes, and we are all very grateful to you, Joan; but, my love, it is very late, and I am rather tired'; and this gentle hint was sufficient for Joan.

Another week passed happily away, and Joan had been a month at Morningside, when, on the last day of October, when the wind was stripping the trees of their leaves and moaning through the Brantwood copses, a telegram reached Lady Mary:

Shall take morning train. Expect you both to dinner this evening. MERRITON.

'Dear me,' remarked Lady Mary, looking gently flustered, 'this is rather a surprise, Joan, for Dorothy told me in her last letter that her father did not mean to come home until the middle of next week.'

'Probably he has some business that needs his attention earlier,' suggested Joan. 'Shall I run over to the Abbey and see if we are really expected?'

'Yes, perhaps that will be best. I wish I had had the telegram an hour ago, before I gave Hartley the menu for the evening. Well, it cannot be helped; find out all you can, Joan, and I will wait until you come back.'

But the girl had little to report on her return. The housekeeper had had a telegram also, ordering dinner for three. 'As the carriage is to meet the 1.15 train,' went on Joan, 'Lord Merriton will be at the Abbey in time for luncheon. Of course I told Mrs. Robson that we were the expected guests.'

'Must you go over to Herondale this afternoon, Joan?'

'Yes, indeed I must; I promised to take those scrapbooks to Prudence; but I will be back in good time for tea. You don't know how Rascal and I will enjoy battling our way through this delicious wind. It is so soft with all its violence, and it is such fun to see the crimson and yellow leaves waltzing and

eddying round one. It nearly drives Rascal crazy because he can't catch them all.'

'Oh, what it is to be young, Joan!' But it may be doubted whether Lady Mary's gentle, equable temperament had even in youth known the exuberant joy of life which was natural to Joan, and which was one of her chief charms.

When luncheon was over and Joan had gone upstairs to put on her hat, Lady Mary walked to the window; but the whirling leaves and tossing branches of the trees made her quite giddy.

'How tastes differ!' she thought as she selected a book and sat down by her own snug fireside.

The book was interesting, but the warmth and stillness of the quiet room had a soporific influence over the reader, and Lady Mary was only roused from a refreshing nap by the sound of the door-bell; and as she straightened herself in her chair and adjusted the ruffles at her wrists in expectancy of some visitor, Lord Merriton walked into the room.

'Why, George,' in a pleased tone, as he greeted her, 'I never dreamt of seeing you this afternoon. It is very good of you to take the trouble when we are coming to the Abbey this evening.'

'Well, it came into my head, when I had finished luncheon, that it would be a nice thing to do,' and Lord Merriton settled himself contentedly in the opposite easy-chair. 'Are you alone, Mary?'

'Yes, Joan is out. She has gone over to Herondale, but she will be back in good time to make the tea for us. How well you look, dear! How have you left Hildegarde and Dorothy?'

'Oh, they are as fit as possible,' he returned a little absently. 'Do you know, Mary, I never come into

this room without thinking it is far cosier than any of ours at the Abbey.'

'You used to say the same of our drawing-room at Roskill Priory.'

'Oh yes, I remember. A fine old place that! Hildegarde says you have a knack of putting furniture in its right place. She thinks you have quite a genius for arrangement.'

Lady Mary smiled. These little compliments always pleased her. She took a great deal of pride in her house, and liked to surround herself with pretty things. It was certainly a very charming room, there was something quaint and picturesque about it, and she and Joan loved no other room so well; but she had no wish at the present moment to talk about furniture.

'You altered your arrangements, George,' she remarked, as Lord Merriton took up the brass tongs to adjust a log that seemed in peril; 'I understood that you were not coming up until the middle of next week.'

'No, but there was some difficulty about the lease of the Upfold Farm. The new tenant has objected to one clause, and Lathom wanted to see me about it, so we changed our programme. I have only come for three nights, and shall go down to Templeton on Saturday. And I shall bring back the wife and Dorothy on Thursday.'

'Do you mean next Thursday?'

'Yes; we think our visit has been quite long enough, and that we have no right to trespass on their hospitality any longer. Why, it will be just six weeks, and Hildegarde is quite well enough to come home. We shall pick up Craig in town and come down all together, and you must be at the Abbey to receive us.'

'You may be quite certain that, if all is well, I shall be there,' she returned quietly, but she checked an inward sigh. There was only another week for Joan! Her brother's next speech fairly electrified her.

'And now for my news, Mary. I came across this afternoon because I could not wait until this evening—that is why I am so glad to find you alone.'

'Oh, what is it, George?' and a nervous flush came to Lady Mary's face. 'Surely nothing has happened?'

'Nothing that is not entirely satisfactory. It is rattling good news! as Craig would say. Viscount Helmore has proposed to our little girl Dorothy, and she has accepted him.'

CHAPTER XXXV

'A FINE FELLOW, JOHN HELMORE'

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy, if I could say how much.—SHAKESPEARE.

'GEORGE, my dear brother, you have taken my breath away!' Lady Mary looked quite pale. The news was so surprising, so utterly unexpected, that she could hardly believe her ears.

'I knew it would startle you, but it was no use beating about the bush. Good luck has not come our way lately, so I thought I would tell you the great news without delay.'

'You are very kind; but when — when did it happen?'

'Well, Helmore spoke to me some days ago when we were on the golf-links together. I don't think I ever was so taken aback in all my life as when he asked me for my little girl. He is a fine fellow, John Helmore, though I should have preferred a younger son-in-law without incumbrances in the shape of grown-up daughters; but he is only fifty, and as hale and hearty as any one could wish, and he is a far richer man than Lord Angus Rother.'

'And Dorothy—tell me about Dorothy.'

'Well, he spoke to her the day before yesterday. He knew how to manage her better than Lord Angus did. Having daughters of his own, I suppose, has put him up to a thing or two; but anyhow the girl accepted him, and went straight to her mother to tell her so.'

'But is she sure of her own mind, George? Does she really care for Viscount Helmore? You remember how she treated Lord Angus.'

'Well, you know what a shy little mouse Dollie is. I can't say I got much out of her myself; but Hildegarde declares that she is very much in love, and can hardly believe in her good fortune. She certainly looked very sweet when Helmore dined with us that evening, though I don't remember hearing her voice. By the bye, Hildegarde and Dollie have both written to you, and there is a note for Joan.'

Lady Mary was too busy with her questions to read her letters. They would keep, she thought, until her brother had gone, and there was something else she particularly wished to ask him.

'George, I want you to tell me exactly how Hildegarde feels about this engagement.'

'Well, she is as proud as a hen with one chick, and so excited that she can talk and think of nothing else. Last evening she said to me, "I cannot honestly say that I should not have preferred Lord Angus for a son-in-law, as he is so much nearer Dollie's age, and though he is a widower, still there are no children; but I don't think Dollie ever really cared for him."

'"And you think Helmore has won her heart?" I asked her.

'"Oh, I am sure of it," she returned, "and that is

why I am so happy about the dear child. Dorothy is so peculiar, I was beginning to fear that she would end by being an old maid, and I did so want her to be happily married. It is quite true," she went on, "that her three step-daughters will look like her younger sisters, but there is no son, Merriton, to inherit that fine estate." And then she looked at me, and I knew what thought was in her head, and I confess the same idea had occurred to me.' And here the Earl rubbed his hands with a low chuckle of amusement.

'What a manœuvring, worldly old couple we are! —eh, Mary?'

'I can understand Hildegarde's pleasure in Dorothy's engagement,' returned Lady Mary thoughtfully; 'but I suppose nothing will be settled about the marriage for some time to come?'

'Well, not exactly settled,' replied Lord Merriton, 'it is rather early days for that. But Helmore had a little talk with us yesterday. He said he should like it to be as soon as possible, but that he did not wish to hurry us or put us to any inconvenience—that we should doubtless wish the wedding to be a quiet one. He spoke very sensibly, and showed a good deal of consideration for our feelings, but it is evident that he would like to carry off Dorothy as soon as we can spare her.'

'Oh, that is just the difficulty, George. Dorothy is an only daughter—what will her mother do without her?'

Lord Merriton shrugged his broad shoulders with rather a whimsical smile.

'Well, that is where Hildegarde surprises me. She does not seem to think of herself or me at all in the matter. She says Dorothy must be our chief con-

sideration, and that a man of Helmore's age would dislike a long engagement. "You must tell Mary that I do not think the marriage ought to be later than February, especially as we are all agreed that it must be quiet; but I will talk to Dorothy, and I daresay when you return on Saturday we shall have come to some decision."'

'Yes, I see, that will be in three months' time. I think I comprehend Hildegarde's view. Very likely she is right, but all the same I do not see how either of you are to do without Dorothy. Ah, there is Joan, but we have had time for a nice long talk.' And then Joan came in glowing with health and exercise, and a moment later Willis followed with the tea-tray.

By mutual consent nothing of any moment was said until Joan had poured out the tea. The Earl had exhausted his budget and felt somewhat fatigued. But as Joan presently handed him the hot tea-cakes, he said abruptly:

'Dollie asked me to give you this note, with her love; I think the contents will surprise you.' And Lord Merriton's tone was so significant that Joan, who had been vaguely conscious of something electric in the atmosphere, felt at once that something had occurred. As usual, her first thought was Craig.

'Oh, what is it—please tell me?' she said a little breathlessly. 'I am quite sure from your and Lady Mary's manner that something has happened.'

'Well, yes, Dorothy has gone and engaged herself to Lord Helmore—with her parents' sanction, remember—and we are all very much pleased and excited.' But to Lord Merriton's surprise Joan grew suddenly very pale.

'Dorothy engaged—my dear Dorothy! Oh, I am so

glad—so very glad!' But her eyes were full of tears, and it was evident that she could say no more, so she sat down in the lamplight to read her note.

Lady Mary looked across at her anxiously. If they had been alone Joan would have been kneeling on the rug at her feet, and they would have read their letters together. Dorothy's note was very short.

'Dearest Joan,' she wrote, 'I have just written to Aunt Mary, and have only time for this wee note. Father will have told you the wonderful news. I have been engaged two days, but I can hardly realise the fact yet, although I have seen it coming and knew how it would all end.

'Oh, I am so happy, Joan, but I cannot write about it. There is no one like him—there never has been! If I could talk to you about it; but I fear there is no chance of that, as we are coming home on Thursday and I believe Craig will be with us. Do you know, Joan, I can understand you and Craig better now, and I feel so sorry for you both. I want every one I love to be as happy as I am, and when I think how you are banished from your home it makes me so sad. Besides, I really crave a sight of your dear face after all these months. Father says I must hurry up. So good-bye for the present.—Your loving DOROTHY.'

'Well, I must be going back; I have some letters to answer before dinner'—and Lord Merriton rose reluctantly from his comfortable chair. 'I will let myself out. *Au revoir*, ladies. Don't be later than half-past seven.'

The room seemed strangely still for a time. Lady Mary leaned back in her chair and read her letters, and Joan sat still at the tea-table with her hand shielding her face from the light. She was trying to battle with some rebellious thoughts which threatened to master her.

'Joan darling, come here, I want to talk to you.'

And as Joan obeyed the summons, Lady Mary made room for her on the square footstool.

'I have had such delightful letters from Lady Merriton and Dorothy; you must read them presently.'

'May I have them now?' pleaded Joan rather wistfully. Then Lady Mary handed them to her. But as Joan eagerly perused them, her friend still watched her rather anxiously.

Why had Joan taken it so quietly? Something seemed to have upset her and checked her gladness. She had hardly spoken a word since the news had been told her. But Lady Mary was a patient woman, and she could wait, and after all she was not kept long in suspense.

'Thank you,' observed Joan presently; 'I am so glad that you let me read those letters.' Then she leant on Lady Mary's lap with her chin propped on her hands, and looked earnestly up into her friend's face.

'Dearest, you must not think that I am not pleased about this because I have been a little silent. I am more glad and thankful than I can say that our dear, good Dorothy will have some one to care for her all her life. Oh, how happy she is—one can read it in every line—but she seems hardly able to realise it.'

'Oh, you must give her time, Joan.'

'Yes, I know. And then it is so nice to see Lady Merriton writing in her old natural way. Dorothy's engagement will do her mother a world of good. She will forget herself and her troubles; it will be nothing but Dorothy now.'

'Yes, and she seems so thoroughly satisfied with her prospective son-in-law. You see what she says—that Lord Helmore is a fine-looking man, and hardly

appears his age. I think the idea of the three grown-up daughters troubles her most.'

'Dorothy does not seem to mind,' returned Joan.

'No, indeed, and I am very glad to hear that the girls are pleased about it. Even Orma, who has been her father's companion, seems quite willing to welcome Dorothy.'

'I am glad Lady Merriton told you that. Do you know, dear Lady Mary, that I am quite sure that Dorothy will be an ideal step-mother. She is so gentle and yielding, and yet she has plenty of character. She will just love to devote herself to that poor suffering girl.'

'I agree with you, Joan; and personally I believe I shall like Lord Helmore much better than that Lord Angus they talked so much about, as he seemed to me rather a colourless individual.'

'I thought so too from Dorothy's description, and I think she was very wise to get rid of him. Perhaps this has something to do with Lady Merriton not wishing for a long engagement. But I do not think that she need fear that Dorothy will change her mind this time.'

'No, indeed.' And then, after a moment's silence—'Joan, did Dollie tell you that they are all coming home on Thursday?'

'Oh yes, she told me so, and that Craig would be with them. So I suppose I shall have to go back to St. Breda's Lodge on Wednesday?'

'I am afraid so, darling, I don't see what else is to be done. But it certainly spoils things, and it is very hard on you and Dorothy.'

'It is more than hard—it is absolutely cruel!' returned Joan in a choked voice, 'and I do not know

how to bear it. Not to see dear Dorothy or give her one kiss of congratulation——!' But here poor Joan utterly broke down; she hid her face on Lady Mary's lap and sobbed like a broken-hearted child. Lady Mary nearly cried too.

'Hush, darling! Oh, my dear child, you must not give way like this! Don't, Joan; for my sake try to be calm!' But it was some minutes before the girl could control herself.

'Oh, I am so sorry,' she murmured; 'I did not want to be selfish and think of my own feelings, but it was too much to bear.'

'Yes, I know; but, Joan, we will find some way out of it. I will speak to my brother this evening. Craig must stop away for a day or two, and you shall have your talk with Dollie. Don't fret any more, dearest, I will make it all right for you.' And Lady Mary spoke in such a quiet, determined tone that Joan was quite sure that she meant to carry out her words.

It was time for them to dress; so, after a grateful kiss, Joan hurried away to bathe her flushed face and swollen eyelids and rearrange her dishevelled hair. She was ashamed of her want of self-control, but the tears had relieved her. And although she was a little pale and subdued for the remainder of the evening, Lord Merriton would not have discovered that anything was wrong if his sister had not explained things to him.

'I am sure, I don't know what is to be done,' he said in a perplexed tone, 'for Craig telegraphed that he should meet us in town and come down with us, and it would never do for Hildegarde to be upset the first moment she gets home.'

'Certainly not, and I should be the last person to

advise anything that would be likely to worry her. But surely neither she nor you would mind very much if Craig deferred his home-coming until Monday?'

'Well, no, I suppose not,' rather reluctantly; 'only Craig will think it a bit strange, I am afraid.'

'I think not, George. If you will give me his address, I will write to him myself and explain matters to him, and you will see that he will make no difficulty about it.'

And Lady Mary soon proved that she was right. Craig's answer was entirely satisfactory; the news of Dorothy's engagement had put him into a good humour, he said. He quite approved of her choice, and was anxious to give her his fraternal blessing. Helmore was certainly an elderly brother-in-law, but he was a decent fellow, and he preferred him infinitely to Lord Angus. As for deferring his visit to Brantwood, Craig was quite explicit on that point.

You may tell Joan that I am quite willing to stay away a month if it will only keep her longer at Morningside. Of course she and Dorothy will have lots to say to each other. If Monday is too soon, you can just write to me and say so, and I will not turn up for another week. Now, dear Aunt Mary, I don't send Joan my love, first, because you will not deliver it; and secondly, because she has it already.—Your affectionate nephew, JOSSELYN.

Of course Lady Mary kept the contents of this letter to herself. Being a prudent and conscientious woman, she only told Joan that everything had been comfortably arranged. Craig was quite willing to remain in town until Monday, or even longer if they wished; 'but, under the circumstances,' she continued, 'I do not think he ought to stay away more than those three days. We will ask Dorothy to spend the whole day

with us on Friday. I shall very likely dine at the Abbey again that evening, and leave you two young things to have a cosy time together.'

But Joan would not hear of this for a moment. It was her last evening and Lady Mary must not absent herself. She and Dorothy would have plenty of time for talk, and they would enjoy their cosy evening all three together. 'You know Dorothy and I never find you in the way and that we love to have you,' she finished. And Lady Mary was only too willing to remain by her own fireside.

CHAPTER XXXVI

'DON'T SAY ANY MORE, DOLLIE'

> Now I would face the world with my new life,
> With my new crown.
> How soon a smile of God can change the world!
> How we are made for happiness—how work
> Grows play, adversity a winning fight!
>
> BROWNING.

PRUDENCE RUTHERFORD had promised to come over the following afternoon, and of course she was at once informed of Dorothy's engagement. To Lady Mary's and Joan's surprise she took it far more quietly than they expected. She was intensely interested, questioned them eagerly on every possible detail, and showed lively tokens of pleasure in her friend's good fortune, but there was no expression of wonder.

'Why, Prudence, you don't seem a bit surprised!' exclaimed Joan. 'Surely you were not in Dorothy's confidence?' Prudence laughed and shook her head.

'No, indeed. Dorothy is the last person to write about such things; she never mentioned Lord Helmore in any of her letters, though she generally alluded to the girls, especially Orma. The fact is,' as Joan looked at her inquiringly, 'I think I take after my great-grandmother, Grizel MacDonald. She was a Highland

woman, and had the gift of second sight. She was rather a wonderful person, and though I don't pretend to inherit her gift, I might almost say, as old Dame Willey does sometimes, "I feel happenings in my bones," for certainly I have the most curious presentiments. I had quite an odd feeling about Dorothy when she went to Templeton. I remember saying to myself one night, "Now, I wonder if anything will happen?"'

'But you did not even know of Lord Helmore's existence?' observed Joan in a puzzled tone.

'No, my dear; and even when Lady Mary mentioned him one day, and said how pleasant it was for Dorothy to have cheerful young companions, I only pictured him to myself as a sturdy John Bull—the sort of paterfamilias so dear to Leech—with side whiskers and a generally prosperous, uninteresting exterior. But from Lady Mary's description he seems a very different type of person.'

'You may be quite sure of that,' returned Joan; 'but oh, I do wish he were a few years younger!'

'I don't think I shall say amen to that. Dorothy is just the sort of girl to be perfectly happy with a man old enough to be her father. Oh, Lady Mary, it really is too delightful! I am dying to tell Morven, he will be so pleased.' And Prudence's plain face beamed until it was quite transfigured.

And after that they gathered round the fire and talked as only three simple, kind-hearted women can talk, until the gathering darkness warned Prudence that it was time to go home. Not that she minded her solitary walk, for every one knew her and she was absolutely fearless—on winter afternoons she would carry a lantern to prevent her from stumbling over

snags and tree-trunks—but she knew if she were later than usual Morven would leave his comfortable, warm study to come in search of her.

After that Lady Mary and Joan made the most of their few remaining days. Lord Merriton was too busy to give them much of his company, and they only saw him in the evenings. Dorothy wrote again very briefly to express her pleasure at hearing that Joan would remain at Morningside until Saturday afternoon.

Tell Aunt Mary that I shall be delighted to spend Friday with you both. We must have a long walk, Joan—you and I and Rascal. Of course I am very sorry to leave Templeton; I don't think I have ever been happier anywhere. Aunt Miriam is such an old dear. She and Uncle Rupert spoil me dreadfully, and they are so pleased to think that I shall be their neighbour one of these days. Now I have promised to go out with mother, as Aunt Miriam has to stay in and nurse a cold, so I cannot write more.

When Thursday arrived, Lady Mary went up to the Abbey to receive the travellers, and as she intended to remain to dinner, she had begged Prudence to keep Joan company, and they spent a very pleasant evening together. The carriage which brought Lady Mary back would take Prudence to the Rectory; and both she and Joan exclaimed at the shortness of the evening when they heard the carriage wheels outside, and Prudence hurried off to put on her hat, that the horses might not have to stand too long in sight of their stable.

Lady Mary threw off her evening wrap with its costly border of sable. She looked tired but happy. 'It has been such a pleasant evening, Joan,' she began when Prudence had gone. 'Lady Merriton looks so well; she has certainly gained flesh, and she had quite

a nice colour. Of course she was a little upset at first, that was quite natural, but we made her lie down and have some tea, and then she talked quite cheerfully.'

'And Dorothy?'

'Oh, Dollie looked really pretty. Justine had done her hair in some new way which suits her. I never saw her so well dressed, and her engagement ring is beautiful. Of course they showed me Lord Helmore's photograph. I am sure you will like it, Joan; it is such a strong, sensible face, full of character, and with such kind eyes. He has iron-grey hair, and has never worn a moustache. Lady Merriton says his mouth is his best feature.'

'Did Dorothy talk much about him?'

'Well, dear, she had no opportunity — we were not alone for a single minute—so she listened while her mother talked, or went off to help her father; you know what a good, unselfish little soul Dollie is. But she looks wonderfully happy—oh, there is no doubt of that.'

'I suppose she will come quite early to-morrow?'

'Well, not as early as she intended. Lady Merriton would like to see you, Joan; so Dollie wants you to go across after breakfast, and she will take you up to her mother's dressing-room for half-an-hour or so, and then she will come back with you.'

'Oh dear,' sighed Joan, 'I wish I could have had Dorothy all to myself. I am so afraid Lady Merriton will keep us talking until the best part of the morning is over.'

Lady Mary smiled at Joan's petulant tone, but she was well aware that this would probably be the case. When Lady Merriton was interested in a subject she often tried her listener's patience.

'Oh, I have guarded against that,' she said quietly. 'Dorothy suggested a walk over Sudlow Hill, so I promised that I would take my work and sit with her mother until luncheon.'

'Oh, how nice of you!' And Joan smoothed her puckered brow. 'Well, I won't keep you up talking, for you look dreadfully tired, in spite of your pleasant evening.' And as Lady Mary could not deny this, they went upstairs together.

Directly breakfast was over the next morning, Joan put on her hat, and whistling for Rascal, hurried over to the Abbey; but to her chagrin she heard that Lord Merriton and his daughter were only half-way through their meal. Joan would have waited in another room, but the servant told her he had orders to show her into the breakfast-room directly she came; and as the door opened, Dorothy jumped up to greet her in the most loving manner.

'We are shamefully late, Joan; father only came in a quarter of an hour ago; but you won't mind sitting down and talking to us while we finish, and then we will go up to mother?'

Joan smiled and nodded assent. She was quite content to sit in the sunny room and look at Dorothy, and to listen to the Earl's good-natured platitudes.

Lady Mary was right, she thought, Dorothy had certainly grown prettier. Her features had always been nice, but they had lacked expression and animation, and her shyness and want of assurance often gave her a diffident, uneasy manner. Lady Merriton, who was a very stately and imposing dame, always seemed to overshadow her daughter, and Dorothy was only too willing to remain in the background.

It was not only that the peacock blue serge set

off her fair hair and delicate complexion, there was some subtle change in her, a gentle dignity, a new air of repose and confidence; and Joan, who read her friend like a book, needed no word to tell her that, whatever the difference in age might be between her and her affianced husband, Dorothy had found her rightful mate.

So much she could take for granted, but all the same she longed to find herself alone with her old companion, but she knew it was useless to attempt to hurry the Earl. He had a wonderfully hearty appetite for a man of his age, and he liked to open his letters and grumble audibly over their contents, or skim the newspaper that lay beside his plate, reading out any paragraph which took his fancy. And he saw no reason to alter his habits on this particular morning. The girls looked at each other—it was impossible for them to talk at such a disadvantage. But Dorothy, who had been disciplined in the Early Victorian school, would never have dreamt of begging her father to finish his breakfast. She took away his cold coffee and gave him another cupful, fresh and hot, while Joan fidgeted and muttered under her breath. She was saying to herself, 'Oh, you tiresome old dear, why don't you see that politics is not interesting us a bit, and that we want to be out—out, where we can talk to each other?' But, happily for Joan's patience, at that moment Justine entered with a message from her mistress. She had heard that Joan had arrived.

'My lady is up, and in her dressing-room, and will be enchanted to see Mademoiselle Joan,' observed Justine, and this at once made a diversion.

'Why, Dollie, my dear, I had no idea it was so late, and that leading article is so good. Run along, girls,

don't keep my lady waiting,' with playful mimicry of Justine's mincing accents.

Lady Merriton received Joan very kindly, even affectionately, and when she had asked her a civil question or two about herself and her belongings, she plunged into the subject which was nearest her heart. But for Lady Mary's thoughtful punctuality, the girls would certainly have been late for their walk; for once Lady Mary took things into her own hands.

'Let them go out now, Hildegarde,' she said quietly; 'it is Joan's last day, and she wants to talk to Dorothy.' And Lady Merriton was induced to let them go.

Joan seemed as though she could not breathe freely until they were out of sight of the Abbey; then she consented to slacken her pace.

'Oh, Dorothy, you sweet thing,' she said affectionately, 'I thought I should never get you to myself!'

'Father was rather trying,' returned Dorothy placidly. 'Since mother has been upstairs he dawdles far more over his breakfast than he used to do. I always have some knitting beside me, so as not to waste time. But I was up quite early this morning, Joan, and had written my letter before I left my room.'

'Your letter? Oh, of course, to Lady Templeton.'

'No; mother will write to Aunt Miriam'—and here Dorothy blushed in rather an embarrassed way. 'I meant my letter to Lord Helmore.' Then Joan laughed and gave her friend's arm a loving little squeeze.

'But you don't intend to write to him every day surely, Dollie?'

'I don't know—I am not sure—but I think he would like it. He will be coming down in another ten days or so. He says he wants to see the Abbey and

Aunt Mary. She was so pleased when I told her that. He will only stay for two or three days, but I shall get mother to ask Prudence and Mr. Rutherford to dinner.'

'You are very proud of your lover, Dorothy, I can see that.'

'Proud of him! I should think so. Any girl would be proud of such a man'—and here Dorothy's sweet face seemed suddenly illuminated. 'He has the noblest and the kindest and the best heart in the world—Orma will tell you that. And to think he has chosen me!'

'Well, dear, I think Lord Helmore has done rather a wise thing for himself, and Lady Mary thinks the same.'

'Oh, that is because you both love me; but I shall never consider myself worthy to be his wife. When we go back I must show you his photograph. Mother says I shall look like his eldest daughter, but I don't mind her saying that one bit. You know, I never cared for young men, Joan; they always seemed so vapid and tiresome.'

'There are exceptions sometimes,' remarked Joan drily.

'Oh, you are thinking of Craig! Yes, I grant you that he is not in the least vapid.' But Joan did not want to speak of Craig just then, her face burnt at the mere mention of his name. She changed the subject rather abruptly.

'There is one thing I want to ask you, Dorothy—are you sure that the girls will not be in your way?'

'In my way!' in quite an astonished tone. 'Why, my dear Joan, I shall love to have them. We are already quite on sisterly terms. Even Bee, who is only

fifteen, and such a darling, calls me Dorothy. And as for Orma, it will be quite a privilege to be allowed to care for her. You know'—and here Dorothy's manner was intensely earnest—'I never did want to lead a gay, idle life. Lord Helmore and I certainly agree on that point; he loves his library and his books, and he hates London almost as much as I do.'

'I am glad you have told me all this, Dollie; you said so little in your note.'

'No, I could not write about it, and it was all so fresh then. Joan, I must tell you that we are really to be married in the middle of February; mother does not wish us to wait longer, and Lord Helmore seemed so grateful to her. It is to be a very quiet wedding. Violet and Bee have set their hearts on being bridesmaids, and as their father does not mind, there is no reason to disappoint them; and of course I must have Marjorie and Cicely, they will expect it, and, Joan——' here Dorothy stopped and looked extremely uncomfortable.

'Well, what of Joan?' in rather a low voice.

'Oh, you know—the old promise—surely you cannot have forgotten it?'

'Do you suppose I shall hold you to that now?' flashed Joan in quite a fiery tone, but oh, the pain at her heart as she said it!—'that, under the circumstances, I should expect to be present at the wedding, much less be one of your bridesmaids? Oh, don't say any more, Dollie, it hurts me too much, and it is no fault of yours!' and Joan had to bite her lip until it nearly bled for fear her emotion should overmaster her.

Dorothy looked at her sorrowfully. No, it was not her fault, she knew that. She would gladly run the

risk if she could only have Joan with her on that day, but she knew also it would be useless to plead with her mother. 'Oh, my poor Joan!' was all she could find to say, but her tone was full of loving sympathy.

CHAPTER XXXVII

'I SHALL SEE YOU BEFORE CHRISTMAS'

It is easy enough to be pleasant
When life flows by like a song,
But the man worth while is the one who will smile
When everything goes dead wrong.

For the test of the heart is trouble,
And it always comes with the years;
And the smile that is worth the praises of earth
Is the smile that shines through tears.

ELLA WHEELER WILCOX.

THE walk to which the two girls had looked forward so eagerly threatened to end sadly, but Joan with an effort pulled herself together. 'I won't be selfish—I won't spoil things for Dorothy,' she said to herself. Then aloud—'Let us put all that out of our minds, Dollie, and only talk of pleasant things. There is so much I want to know, and it may be some time before we are together again. I expect you will be going up to town in another week or two about your trousseau?'

'I suppose so; mother says there is no time to lose.'

'What a pity you cannot go to the Grosvenor Square house, now it is let to that American millionaire.'

'Oh no, I am rather glad than otherwise; I did so hate that dismal old house. Uncle Rupert and Aunt Miriam have been so good to us. Mother and I are to

go to their house at Albert Gate and stay as long as we like. They never go up to town at this time of year, and we shall take some of our servants and make ourselves quite at home. Father and Craig will come backwards and forwards. It is such a big house, Joan, and so bright and cheerful, so nothing could be better.'

'But you will spend Christmas at the Abbey, as usual?'

'I imagine so; I should be very sorry to spend it anywhere else. Mother said something to Aunt Mary about joining us for a week or two, but she said she never liked to be in town in November.'

The subject of the trousseau occupied them until they reached home. Lady Mary had just returned from the Abbey, and luncheon was nearly ready, so they had hardly removed their walking things before the gong summoned them to the dining-room. Lady Mary left the two girls alone until tea-time, and excusing herself on the plea of fatigue, went up to her room to rest.

Joan sat on the rug in the firelight, listening with rapt interest while Dorothy gave her a vivid description of her future home, and then discoursed quite eloquently on the idiosyncrasies and good qualities of the Helmore girls. If Violet was charming and Bee bewildering and a perfect dear, it was Orma who was evidently closest to Dorothy's heart. 'I never knew any one so good and patient and so utterly unselfish,' she was saying as Lady Mary re-entered the room.

'Were you talking of Orma, Dollie?' inquired her aunt in an interested tone. 'Oh, don't stop, I believe I want to hear about her as badly as Joan does'; and then the conversation flowed on again. Tea was brought in and the lamps lighted, and still Dorothy's budget seemed inexhaustible.

It was a lovely evening, Joan thought, when she recalled it afterwards. She and Dorothy sang their favourite songs, while Lady Mary knitted baby socks, or looked lovingly at the two fair heads, which were so close together.

When Dorothy had taken her leave and gone back to the Abbey, Joan took her old place.

'Have you had a happy day, darling?' asked Lady Mary, as she put aside her knitting-basket.

'Yes, indeed; and Dorothy has been such a dear, she has told me all I wanted to know.'

'I am glad of that. Now you will leave us more happily.' Then Joan checked a sigh.

'I will try my best to be cheerful,' she said a little soberly. 'But of course I shall want to be here all the time; all the more, I am afraid, when I think of your being here alone, while they are all at Albert Gate.'

'Oh, I shall have my brother to look after me; I don't think he or Craig will be much in town.' Lady Mary said this purposely, that Joan might not think there was any possibility of even a short visit. But Joan cheated herself with no such hope. Craig was too evidently on the war-path, and she would only be considered safe under her brother's custody.

It had been arranged that Joan should take a mid-day train from Atherton, and that Dunlop should accompany her. They would drive from Waterloo to Charing Cross, and be in good time for the 4.30 train. As Lady Mary had old-fashioned notions on the subject of young ladies travelling alone, Dunlop would put her in charge of the guard. Lady Mary had arranged all this most carefully, and intended to drive to Atherton with Joan; but when the girl joined her at breakfast the next morning, she told her that Dunlop had

suffered all night with raging toothache, and would be quite unfit to travel.

'I shall have to send Willis,' she said; 'I hope you won't mind, dear?' And Joan professed herself quite indifferent as to her escort.

'There is not the least need for either of them to go; I could manage quite well by myself, and the St. Breda's guard knows me.' But Lady Mary negatived this so decidedly that Joan said no more.

Joan was very quiet during the drive. She had found plenty to do that morning, finishing off her packing to spare the suffering Dunlop, and then she had to go over to the Abbey to say good-bye. Dorothy walked back with her. She had filled a basket with beautiful flowers for her, and there was a box of grapes for Canon Leigh from the Abbey vinery, with the Earl's compliments. Lord Merriton loved to pay these little attentions. Joan expressed her gratitude rather hurriedly.

They were so kind, and yet—but no, she would not think of that! She would have plenty of time for thought at St. Breda's; but she could not talk even to Lady Mary.

'I know you will tell me about everything,' was all she said, as they stood on the windy platform at Atherton. When the train came in sight, and Willis went off to look after the luggage, they embraced almost silently, and the next moment Joan was waving her farewell from the carriage window. There was only one other passenger in the compartment. Willis had settled his charge comfortably, and had withdrawn to the farther corner with his paper, and Joan watched the flying hedgerows absently. How long was this to go on, she thought—this dreary game

of hide and seek? How different her lot was from Dorothy's—dear sweet Dorothy—who was going to marry the man she loved and idealised! But no—there should not be one grudging thought of her happiness!

Joan reasoned with herself, but nothing could lift the weight of depression off her; not even the remembrance of yesterday could soothe her. To think that Dorothy, who was like her own sister, would be married, and she, Joan, would not be allowed to be present! 'I wonder what Craig will say when he knows of it,' she thought; and then the train showed signs of slackening, and Willis took down the packages from the rack.

'This is Waterloo, ma'am,' he said. 'I will find a four-wheeler, and then go after the luggage.' Joan assented wearily. The porters were keeping pace with the train, one of them had his hand on the door, when some one else took his place.

'Oh, you are there, Joan! I thought you would take this train.' Craig's hand was holding hers tightly. 'Halloo, Willis, so you have come to look after Miss Leigh? Suppose you go after the luggage while I put her into a cab. You are going to Charing Cross, of course?'

'Oh yes,' returned Joan. She was so dazed by Craig's sudden appearance that she hardly knew what she was about. The half-tender, half-mischievous smile with which he had greeted her had warmed her through and through like a ray of sunshine. Oh, what would Lady Mary say? But no, she could not think of that now. The present moment was too precious to be lost!

'Oh, Craig,' she murmured, as they crossed the

platform, 'how could you guess I should come by this train?'

'Well, I could not be sure, of course, but it came into my head I should like to meet you. I was here two hours ago, but you had not come by that earlier train.' Craig stated this fact in an easy tone, as though he were performing quite a meritorious action. 'Jump in, Joan; I am going with you as far as Charing Cross. You will have quite half-an-hour to wait, if not longer, and I will get you some tea. All right, cabby, the man is looking after the luggage, it will be here directly.' And Craig took the place beside Joan.

Willis took things in a very matter-of-fact way as he directed the porter to put the dressing-bag, the box of grapes, and flower-basket inside the cab, and mounted the box. He had been young himself, and, as he sometimes observed to the excellent Mrs. Hartley, 'Nature is nature, and young men will be young men, and act up to their lights, and small blame to them!'

The young couple were a little silent at first, the mere fact of being together seemed to content them. Joan was thinking how nice Craig looked. He had still a smart, soldier-like appearance, and looked so well groomed and aristocratic in his well-cut clothes. Without being a dandy, he was always well-dressed, and that faint delicate aroma of a lately smoked cigarette, hastily thrown away, was simply delicious to Joan.

'I call this luck!' observed Craig cheerfully. 'How fit you look, Joan. I don't believe I have ever seen that fetching hat before. I wonder if you are half as pleased to see me as I am to see you?'

'Oh, Craig!' was all Joan could say, but she was blushing in the most becoming way.

'But you might tell me so,' in a wheedling tone. 'Think of the hours I have been kicking up my heels at this confounded station!'

'Oh, not hours, surely?'

'Well, I went backwards and forwards—my hotel is quite close; but I have been on a sort of tread-mill since my early breakfast, so I think I deserve an answer to my question.'

'Oh, Craig, you know quite well!' As Joan looked hastily out of the window he could see the pink flush was suffusing her fair throat and ear. Had he any idea how pleased she was to see him! she thought. But probably by this time Craig had formed his own ideas on the subject.

They were both a little sorry that Charing Cross was so near; but Craig wasted no time, Willis had his orders, and then Joan was whirled away to the farthest end of the refreshment-room, and settled in a cosy corner, where tea was brought to them.

It was Joan who began the conversation as she unbuttoned her gloves. She was eager to know whether Craig was really satisfied with Dorothy's prospects; and he assured her without a moment's hesitation that in his opinion nothing could be more satisfactory.

'I think Helmore is a good fellow,' he went on, 'and that he will suit Dorothy down to the ground. Dollie is rather an old-fashioned little person, and, except in appearance, she is not particularly young. And Helmore does not look his age, so they are better matched than people would suppose. One could dispense with the step-daughters, of course;

but then nothing is perfect in this best of worlds—eh, Joan?'

'Dorothy seems quite devoted to the girls,' she returned seriously. 'I don't think she would like to be without them. She seems to look upon Orma as her mission in life. You should only hear her talk about her, Craig!' But Craig was not particularly interested in Dorothy's prospective step-daughters.

'The mater tells me that the wedding is fixed for the middle of February, and that they are going up to town in another fortnight for frocks and finery. That was rather a decent idea of Uncle Rupert's, asking them to stay at the Albert Gate house. It will just suit my book too, for I did not want to be at the Abbey just now. Isn't it droll the way we play at Box and Cox, Joan? It is a trifle too funny sometimes!' But Joan had no opinion to offer on this subject, and certainly the comic side had not struck her; so she only answered sedately that she was glad that Craig liked the idea of being in town.

'Yes, I have a good many engagements, and of course I shall be glad to see as much of Dollie as possible, but I expect she and the mater will be awfully busy. By the bye, you will be one of the bridesmaids, Joan—that was an old promise, I remember; so for one day there will be an anmesty and the hoisting up of the white flag.' Craig spoke in all good faith, and really believed what he said, but Joan stared at him blankly.

'Why, Craig,' she faltered, 'of course I have let Dorothy off her promise. How can I expect her to keep it under the circumstances? Lady Mary and every one knows that I cannot be at the wedding.'

There was an ominous flash in Craig's blue eyes, but he did not speak, and Joan went on hurriedly:

'We had a long talk about it yesterday. Dorothy is very sorry, and so am I, but it cannot be helped, and there is no use worrying over it. Lady Marjorie and Cicely, and Violet and Bee Helmore will be the four bridesmaids; for, of course, it would be no use asking Prudence; I believe nothing in the world would induce her to be any one's bridesmaid.'

'Oh, indeed!' was the sole remark that Craig vouchsafed, but it was evident to Joan that he was very angry, and she tried to throw oil on the troubled waters.

'Craig, please, you must not think of speaking about this to Dorothy. It is quite settled, and I will not have the dear thing worried. Please, please promise me this.' But Craig's face might have been carved in stone, it had grown so suddenly hard.

'I never make impossible promises,' he replied; 'but we have no time to discuss this now, I shall have to put you in your train.' Then, as Joan rose from the table, she looked at him so pleadingly that he relented a little.

'Look here, don't you worry your head about it, Joan,' he said as they walked down the platform. 'I don't mean to quarrel with Dollie, even if I have it out with her. She is a good soul, and it is not her fault, for I know how much she cares for you.'

'Oh yes, and I would not have her vexed for the world, and just when she is so happy too.'

'Oh, it won't hurt her to rumple her rose-leaves a bit,' returned Craig calmly. 'Ah, there is old Willis, and he is beckoning us to make haste, we have cut it rather fine.' And then they hurried towards him.

Joan was assisted into the compartment and the door shut before she could say a parting word to Willis, and as the guard waved his flag, Craig put his elbows on the door and looked squarely into Joan's face. 'Don't worry, dear, life is not long enough. We will talk about this again, for I mean to see you before Christmas.'

'Before Christmas! but I am not coming home,' exclaimed Joan, and just then the train moved on and Craig stepped back.

'Never mind, I shall turn up all right.' Joan could just catch the words as she leant forward. Craig's hat was still lifted; he waved it with a final flourish of adieu, and Joan sank back into her seat with a happy laugh, though the tears were in her eyes. All through her journey the words haunted her like a sort of refrain, which seemed to keep time with the hurrying train—'I shall see you again before Christmas—before Christmas I shall see you again.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII

CRAIG BIDES HIS TIME

'Twere well to wait—
The pears upon my trees are still but green,
But they will ripen in the summer sun.
Our vanity would do all things at once;
God takes His time, and puts us all to shame.
I am for trust, for working with a will,
And waiting long to see what comes of it.
AARON WATSON.

CANON LEIGH was at St. Breda's station to meet his sister, and he greeted her with such warmth, and seemed so glad to get her back, that the girl was quite touched.

Joan was too frank by nature, and had too much good sense, to make any secret of her meeting with Craig; at the same time she meant to say as little as possible about it, so she took advantage of the opening her brother gave her as they drove through the lighted streets.

'I suppose Lady Mary sent her maid as usual with you to Waterloo?' he asked.

'Well, no; poor Dunlop had had no sleep all night from toothache, so Willis escorted me. I was so surprised to see Lord Josselyn at Waterloo; he came with us to Charing Cross.'

'Lord Josselyn! I did not know he had returned to town,' observed Canon Leigh. 'Now I wonder if the meeting was accidental on his part?' he said to himself. But as Joan vouchsafed no information on this point, he did not like to question her.

'He seemed very pleased about Lady Dorothy's engagement,' she went on; 'indeed, they are all delighted about it.' And then Heath took his cue, and they were still discussing the impending marriage as they entered the Precincts, and they drove through St. Breda's Lodge gates while Joan was informing her brother that she would certainly not be at the wedding.

'That must be a great disappointment, my dear, both to you and Lady Dorothy?'

'Well, yes,' sighed Joan, 'but we both know it cannot be helped.' And then the carriage stopped, and Silence came out into the porch to receive her.

Joan had certainly no reason to be dissatisfied with her welcome. Silence's sisterly kiss spoke volumes. And the young people received her with affectionate hugs, and assurances that they had missed her dreadfully, and that she had stayed away far too long.

It was all very pleasant and home-like, and Joan tried her best to be cheerful, and succeeded so well that she deceived every one but Silence. But then it is always the silent onlooker who sees most of the game.

As Joan drank her tea, Wanda and Jess told her all the local news that they thought would interest her.

'Mr. Trafford and Dagon are at Kenwyn, Aunt Joan,' Jess informed her presently. 'But they are going away again almost directly, but I don't know where. Do you, Daddy?' Canon Leigh shook his head.

'I did not ask him. The fact is, Joan, one of Canon Ramsay's sons is coming home on sick-leave and Trafford thinks he would be in the way.'

'I wonder which son it is, Heath—surely not Basil?'

'Well, I believe that was the name. It is the one who is a missionary. He has broken down from overwork and is coming home for a long rest.'

'Then it is certainly Basil,' returned Joan in a tone of great interest. 'Oh, how delighted his father will be! I must run round and talk to Mrs. Ramsay, to-morrow.' And Joan kept her word.

She found Mrs. Ramsay and her nephew together; Dagon, as usual, making a sonorous third. But the sleeping partner belonging to Trafford and Co. roused up at the entrance of a friend, and the visitor had quite an ovation.

Joan thought that Mrs. Ramsay looked younger and happier than ever.

'Oh, have you heard the news, Joan?' she asked at once. 'Basil is actually coming home; he will be here the day after to-morrow. The poor dear fellow has been so terribly overworked, and his doctor says he must rest for at least three months, or he will have a serious breakdown, but we shall soon nurse him well'; and Felicia spoke with quite a motherly air.

'I hear that Canon Ramsay is very excited about it.'

'Yes, indeed; but that badly-behaved nephew of mine only laughs at us both. He is actually going away, Joan, because he declares that he will be bored to extinction. Did you ever hear anything so rude?'

'Broken-down missionary at breakfast, luncheon,

and dinner—couldn't stand it!' murmured Dick, unfolding his paper.

'Oh, don't listen to him, Joan, he does not mean a word he says. You have no idea how pleased my husband is at the idea of seeing Basil; he is devoted to all his sons, but I am quite sure that Basil is nearest his heart.'

'He is Joseph and Benjamin rolled in one, with the virtues of both,' remarked the irrepressible Dick. Then Felicia gave her visitor a despairing glance.

'I shall have to take you upstairs, Joan. We shall never be able to talk with Dick in his present mood.'

'Oh my prophetic soul,' groaned Dick, 'as though anything could check that unruly member, especially when its owner is a female!

> When lovely woman stoops to babble,
> And finds too late that tongues betray,
> What use to hush the chattering rabble,
> Which like a stream will have its way!'

'Come, Joan!' Felicia spoke in a gentle, but firm voice.

'*Peccavi*, oh my aunt!' and Dick's brown face peered over his paper. 'Mum's the word, as sure as my name is Richard Trafford. Look here, I will not speak until I have read the leading article from beginning to finish, honest Injun!' and here Dick buried himself behind a wall of paper. And Joan and the much-enduring Felicia sat side by side and talked in low voices of the preparations they were making for the invalid.

Felicia took Joan up presently to see Basil's room in all its glory of new carpet and curtains. As she

passed Dick's chair she laid her hand lovingly on the dark, closely-cropped head. 'Good boy,' she said approvingly.

Dick's face looked as impassive as a heathen Chinee's as he opened the door for the ladies.

'Of course I intend to leave my card on the missionary,' he remarked. 'In early life I was taught manners, and I have never departed from that admirable code of minor morals. Never cut your bread with a knife at dinner. Conundrum number one—why at dinner? Shut the door, but do not slam it. Leave a card on any fellow-creature, provided he is not a ticket-of-leave man or too vulgar for recognition.' But the rest of these words of wisdom were lost as they mounted the stairs.

Mr. Trafford dined at St. Breda's Lodge that evening, and Joan never enjoyed his society more. He talked to her a great deal about Lady Dorothy's engagement, and seemed very interested, and informed her of his plans in the most friendly way.

He thought of running down to Herondale Rectory first, and then spending two or three weeks at Brighton. Later he intended to go to Engelberg for ski-ing and sleighing. 'A fellow I know, and who is rather a chum of mine, has been ordered by his doctor to go there after Christmas; and as he wants a companion, and I hear there is capital sport to be had, I shall be able to combine benevolence with pleasure; and the missionary can remain cock of the walk!' finished Dick with his whimsical smile.

Joan soon found that she had her work cut out for her. The morning after her arrival at St. Breda's Lodge, Silence told her in her grave way that Heath found it necessary to entertain his friends, and that

a dinner-party and an afternoon *musicale* and reception were to be given.

'Of course I could not refuse, Joan, and I knew you would be here to help me. As we want to get them over before Advent, I have already sent out the invitations for the "At Home"—Heath and I made out the list together—and we are to have the dinner-party a few days afterwards.' And then they plunged into an animated discussion which lasted until luncheon.

Joan knew that all this business was good for her, and that it was far better for her to be helping Silence than fretting over her own private troubles; besides, she had Craig's parting words to comfort her. He had promised to see her again before Christmas, and when had he ever failed to keep his word? Joan in her secret heart knew without doubt that, in spite of their separation, Craig never forgot her, that he was absolutely true and faithful, and at times this thought made her perfectly happy. 'There can be no real love without trust,' she would say to herself, 'and I mean to trust him whatever happens.'

Lady Mary had been very much taken aback when Willis informed her on his return that Lord Josselyn had met them at Waterloo and accompanied Miss Leigh to Charing Cross, but she concealed her dismay to the best of her power. Craig was too much for her! she could only hope that this last escapade of his would not reach his mother's ears.

When she encountered him next in the Abbey drawing-room, he gave her one of his keen, quizzical glances.

'I am afraid I am rather in disgrace, Aunt Mary?' he said in a low tone.

'I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself,' she returned with unusual spirit. 'How could you be so naughty, Craig, when you know I trusted you?'

'"Put not your trust in princes or in any other sons of men"—when they are in love,' he returned, quite unabashed by this rebuke; and Lady Mary was too much shocked by what she termed his irreverent quotation to think of any adequate reply.

'Craig, Craig, you are incorrigible; I will have nothing more to do with you!' But Lady Mary looked at the hardened culprit very kindly. Certainly Craig was one of the fighting Bastows, she thought.

'What are you two quarrelling about?' asked Lady Merriton placidly. 'Come and sit down, Mary; Dorothy and I have so much to tell you. We have not heard from Majorie yet, but that dear child Cicely has promised to be here on the 14th.' Then, at the mention of the nut-browne mayde, Craig beat a speedy retreat.

Craig was biding his time; in fact, he was pursuing a Machiavelian policy—masterly inaction was his present plan. There was no hurry; even one of those mediæval saints—he had no idea which—had said 'make haste slowly,' and another old Johnnie had remarked in rather forcible language that 'haste is of the devil.'

Craig had a cool head; he was a bold strategist, but he wished to marshal his forces and to be sure of his ground before he offered battle. It would be a mistake to hasten matters too much; besides, the present moment was not propitious.

Dorothy's thoughts were occupied with delightful anticipations of her fiancé's approaching visit, and her father and mother were busying themselves in preparation for his reception. The hot-houses were visited

and the gardeners interviewed; the principal guest-chamber was to be renovated and freshened up. Both Lady Merriton and her daughter were surprised to find, on a closer inspection, that the carpet was faded and decidedly worn.

'I had no idea it was as bad as this,' observed Lady Merriton with much solemnity to her sister-in-law. 'I am afraid several of the bedrooms require doing up. But you know there has been so little money to spend on mere decoration. That poor dear boy——' But here her voice was a little choked.

It ended by Lady Mary offering to go up to town the next morning with Dorothy, to select a carpet and some warm hangings for the South Room, as it was called.

'You might write out a short list of anything else you require, Hildegarde, as we will sleep one night in town.'

And so it was arranged. Even Lord Merriton made no complaint. The Grosvenor Square house was let, and things were gradually righting themselves, there was no need to grudge a little outlay.

'Hildegarde has been very good,' he said to his sister; 'she has not asked me to do up any of the rooms for the last three or four years, and I am afraid some of them are a bit shabby.'

Lady Mary had made up her mind to go to Maple's There would be no difficulty in the selection; she and Dorothy knew exactly what they wanted. Lord Helmore had been obliged to put off his visit a couple of days, and with pressure there would just be time.

It was a near shave though, for the new carpet was only in its place and the hangings adjusted an hour before the carriage went to Atherton station to meet

the expected guest; but the result filled Lady Merriton with admiration.

'You have done splendidly, Mary,' she said, 'and I am ever so much obliged to you. Really, Dorothy, the South Room is quite the prettiest in the house. It always was a favourite room with our visitors.'

Lord Helmore's visit was a complete success. He was charmed with the Abbey and the woods, and made himself so agreeable when the Rector of Herondale and his sister dined at Brantwood, that Prudence quite fell in love with him.

'He is my ideal of a nobleman,' she said quite seriously, 'and one can see he is a good man. I have no fear for your happiness, Dorothy'—and Prudence gave her a loving hug.

A day or two after their guest had left them the whole family migrated to town. And as soon as they were settled comfortably in Lord Templeton's luxurious house, the mother and daughter occupied themselves with the important business of the trousseau.

And Craig still bided his time.

CHAPTER XXXIX

'THE WORDS OF THE WISE'

> The world is too much with us ; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers : . . .
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon !
>
> WORDSWORTH.

> Ask thy lone soul which laws are plain to thee,
> Thee and no other ! stand and fall by these !
> That is the part for thee.
>
> BROWNING.

'IT is astonishing how much one can do in three weeks,' observed Lady Dorothy in a triumphant tone. 'But then mother and I have worked so hard.'

'Have we only been three weeks in town? it seems much longer'—and Craig's manner was a trifle bored. He had felt rather out of it all these weeks while his women-folk were rushing from milliner to dressmaker most of the day, and were far too weary in the evening to pay him much attention. Craig had to find his own amusements and look up his old friends at the club. Perhaps he was losing patience, or had decided in his own mind that the moment for action had come, for, on learning from Dorothy that there were no business appointments that day, he had rather peremptorily signified his wish that she should go out with him.

It was not a specially fine morning, somewhat dull and cold, not an unusual thing in the middle of December, and Dorothy, who had been very hard-worked, seemed rather dubious.

'The Park looks dismal, Craig, and I have letters to write.' But Craig refused to listen to these flimsy objections.

'Never mind the letters; I want to talk to you. You won't feel cold in your sealskin, and a walk will do you good.' Craig's tone was coaxing, and Dorothy yielded without further protest; she would not have many more walks with him, she thought, and he had had rather a dull time of it lately. So she determined to make herself pleasant.

They crossed the road and entered the Park, which seemed quite empty and deserted at that hour, and, as they walked on quickly, Dorothy answered her brother's remark about the length of their stay.

'Well, it cannot be much over three weeks, as it is only the 14th, and I think we came on the 21st of November. But we have certainly got through a great deal of business.'

'And you have quite decided to go back on the 18th?'

'Yes, father is getting fidgety, and if it comes to the worst I am quite sure Aunt Mary would come up to town with me for a few days after the New Year; not that I think it will be necessary, everything has gone so well, and no one has given me any trouble except that tiresome Marjorie.'

'Oh, I was going to speak to you about that. Just wait one moment. Father told me, to my surprise, that Helmore is coming down again this evening.'

Yes,' returned Dorothy, blushing, 'but only for

two nights; he has to see his lawyer. He thought of going to his club this time, but mother would not hear of it, with all those spare rooms empty.'

'That's all right. And now about Lady Marjorie. Mother told me that, though she is coming to the wedding, she still refuses to be one of the bridesmaids. The mater declared that you would have to fall back on Prudence Rutherford.'

'It is no use mother saying that,' returned Dorothy, with a frown of utter perplexity. 'Prudence is impossible, and the dresses Cicely and I have chosen would certainly not suit her. But I think it is very ridiculous of Marjorie to say she is too old, when she is only twenty-seven, and she is so handsome too! Of course it is only an excuse.'

'What do you intend to do then?' asked Craig quietly.

'Oh, Marjorie will have to give way! Cicely has promised to talk to her, and I am going to write an imploring letter; we shall carry our point in the end. *Nil desperandum*—eh, Craig?' and Dorothy smiled up at him. But Craig's face remained grave.

'I thought it was an old promise that Joan was to be your bridesmaid?' Then Dorothy gave him an uneasy glance. Why should Joan's name be mentioned between them?

'Am I not right?' Craig asked the question a little sternly.

'Yes,' faltered Dorothy. 'And of course we are both dreadfully disappointed; I would rather have had Joan than any one.'

'Then why not have her?' Nothing could be cooler or more matter-of-fact than Craig's tone. Dorothy stared at him helplessly.

'Why, Craig, you know mother would not allow me to have her, even Aunt Mary never expected such a thing. Joan and I had a long talk about it; and though we both felt it dreadfully, and it really has made me very unhappy, we settled that nothing more must be said about it.'

'I am afraid a good deal more will be said about it, Dollie, unless you can induce the mater to change her mind.'

'I induce her!' turning very red. 'My dear boy, what do you mean?'

'I mean that when you go home, or on the first possible opportunity, you must have it out with mother. Tell her that you wish—that you ask it of her as a favour, that Joan should be one of your bridesmaids—that the idea of your oldest and dearest friend being absent on such an occasion makes you feel quite sad. Pluck up spirit, Dollie, for once in your life and dare to assert yourself.'

'Oh, Craig, how can you ask me to do such a thing?' returned poor Dorothy, in a despairing voice. 'As though anything I could say would make mother change her mind! She knows quite well how much I want Joan; but if I talked for hours, nothing would induce her to consent. If only I could make you see that!'

'You might as well ask a blind horse to see the man who is leading him! The thing may be difficult, but it is certainly not impossible. Listen to me, Dollie. If Joan is not at your wedding, I shall not be present either.'

'Oh, Craig, what do you mean?' Dorothy could hardly believe her ears. What dreadful thing would he say next!

'I am quite serious, and, like my mother, when I make up my mind about a thing, the united efforts of the family would not move me. If this insult is put on Joan—on Aunt Mary's adopted daughter and my future wife—I shall certainly manifest my displeasure by absenting myself from the Abbey and the church.'

Dorothy was almost in tears by this time. Craig's manner was so stern and unyielding that it was impossible not to realise that he was in earnest.

'How can you be so dreadfully unkind, Craig—as though you thought it was my fault!'

'I mean no unkindness to you, Dollie dear, and I shall be sorry enough to hurt you; but I am bound to consider my own interest and hers. You know I am engaged to Joan.'

'Engaged!' Dorothy stood still on the path. Happily they were in a secluded part of the Park, and there was no one within sight.

'Yes,' returned Craig calmly; 'but she is not engaged to me. Nothing would induce her to be until my father and mother give their consent, but on my side I am absolutely bound. I told Lady Cicely so.'

'Oh, Craig!'

'I thought it only fair to tell her the truth, and she was awfully nice about it; she is a jolly little girl,' and here Craig frowned for a moment—he never cared to recall that evening. Lady Cicely had been very friendly and sympathetic, had made pretty speeches and sent her love to Joan, but he had seen a sudden shadow cloud her bright face for a moment, and there had been a little quiver of the lip which told him something he did not wish to know.

'If there be any trouble, it is all the mater's fault,' he said rather savagely to himself. 'Lady Cicely is a

dear, brave little soul, and she knows that I never said a word to her that the whole world might not hear.'

Dorothy was too aghast to say anything for a few minutes. She was shivering, but not with cold, and no sealskin could make her feel inwardly warm and comfortable. Craig considered himself engaged to Joan! He had told Cicely so! Oh what would her mother say?

'Craig,' she said at last quite piteously, 'you are making me so unhappy. I did so hope that things would be peaceful just now.' And a tear rolled down her face, though she brushed it hastily away.

'Poor little Dolly,' and Craig patted her shoulder kindly. 'But, from all I can judge of Helmore, I fancy you will have a peaceful time presently.' Then a sudden inspiration came to him. 'Look here, my dear child, take my advice—when Helmore comes, tell him all about it, and see what he says. I am quite sure he will lend you a helping hand. I had an idea of saying something to him myself in the way of apology, if I did not turn up for the ceremony, but you had far better explain the whole thing to him.'

Dorothy pondered over her brother's advice very seriously on her return to the house, and the result was, she determined to follow it.

It would be far easier for her to confide in her future husband than to have to face her mother's indignation and shocked remonstrances. Besides, she had already told him of Craig's infatuation for Joan Leigh, and it had appeared to her that he had been rather sorry for the young lovers.

'If Miss Leigh is a gentlewoman, and, as you tell me, Lady Mary Boyle's adopted daughter, it does not seem such a *mésalliance*,' he had observed.

'Yes, but Joan is poor, and father says Craig ought to marry a girl with money.' But, though Lord Helmore said no more, and only shrugged his shoulders, Dorothy had an impression that he did not wholly side with her father.

Dorothy's unusual seriousness that evening told Lord Helmore that something was amiss with her—she was pale and silent—so after dinner he made some excuse and carried her off into the small inner drawing-room.

'What is the trouble, dearest?' he asked as he placed himself on the couch beside her. And Dorothy, who needed no pressing, repeated the substance of her conversation with Craig that morning.

'He really meant it,' she finished. 'And oh, John, if he is not at the wedding, mother will never get over it, and it will spoil things so!'

'Of course your brother must be there, and Miss Leigh too, and you and I must bring it about. Don't look so sad, darling; it only wants a little determination and courage. Do you know, I rather admire Josselyn for sticking to the girl; I think he is a manly fellow. However, we have no time to discuss it more to-night; besides, you are far too tired. You must get a good night's sleep, and to-morrow, while I am at my lawyer's, you must talk to your mother. Tell her everything plainly and simply as you have told me; and, above all, make her clearly understand that Josselyn refuses to attend our wedding unless Miss Leigh is present.'

'But mother will be so angry with him, and very likely she will make herself ill.'

'We must risk that, I am afraid, for it would never do for your only remaining brother to be absent on such an occasion. And, however indignant Lady

Merriton may be, she will certainly have to yield to the condition.'

'Oh, do you think so, John?' rather doubtfully.

'I am sure of it, dearest. Now you must go and rest, and I will tackle your father; I will give Josselyn a hint to leave us together.' And then he dismissed her half comforted. Timid as she was by nature, she felt an infusion of courage now she had Lord Helmore's strong arm and wise brain upon which to rely for guidance and help.

'Oh, how good he is,' she thought as she went up to her room; 'he is taking all my troubles and difficulties on himself. I hope father will not be too trying. Sometimes he gets so excited when things go wrong and he does not know how to put them right.' Then her thoughts went off on another tack. 'I think it is so splendid of John not to care about money; I have heard him say that mercenary marriages are generally loveless ones.' 'I don't want my girls to marry poor men,' he had said to her, 'but I shall certainly not make wealth my first consideration. Luxury is the sin of the age. If any good fellow who is a gentleman comes after her and tells me he has enough to maintain her in comfort, I shall not refuse my daughter to him because he is not a millionaire's son.'

'I love John all the better for his unworldliness,' she thought. But Dorothy's conscience pricked her when she remembered how easily she had acquiesced in the family verdict that Craig must marry money.

No one ever knew how Lord Helmore contrived to tackle his future father-in-law, but the conversation lasted long between the two men, and by the time it was finished he had shown Lord Merriton a thing or two which rather astonished him.

'Such an idea never entered my head,' he muttered more than once to himself. 'Now, I wonder what Hildegarde will say'; and once he said this aloud.

'You must give her time to get used to the idea, and I expect she will take to it very kindly,' returned Lord Helmore with a smile which was at once shrewd and humorous.

CHAPTER XL

'IT SHALL BE AS YOU ALL WISH'

> You have too much respect upon the world:
> They lose it that do buy it with much care.
>
> SHAKESPEARE.

> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will.
>
> *Ibid.*

'DOROTHY, what is this you are telling me? you must certainly have misunderstood your brother,' and Lady Merriton spoke in a tone of unusual severity. 'My son—my only remaining son refuses to attend his sister's wedding unless we comply with this preposterous condition!'

'Dear mother, he really means it.'

'Then he is either mad or wicked!' with strong indignation. 'Why should a little country girl like Joan disturb the peace of our family life?'

'He says he is engaged to her, though she refuses to listen to him—he told Cicely so. He says he does not intend it to be a secret any longer; that although Joan is free on her side, he considers himself absolutely bound to her.'

'He told Cicely that!' in an agitated voice, and Lady Merriton grew suddenly very pale.

'Yes; he said it was only fair to her to let her know the truth—that Joan was the only girl he ever could or would marry. And, mother dear, I am quite sure he intends to keep his word.'

Dorothy was discharging her commission nobly. Like many gentle, timid natures, she was averse to thrust herself into any altercation or argument. As Craig often remarked, 'she was too fond of taking a back seat,' but Lord Helmore's sympathy and advice had fortified her, and she had worked herself up into a feverish condition which passed for courage. 'I am going up to mother directly after breakfast,' she had said to Craig the next morning, 'John advised me to do so, and I will do my best for you.'

'You are a little brick, Dollie,' he returned gratefully; 'mind you buck up and have your say; the mater's bark is worse than her bite, and she will have to give way, you know.' But Dorothy shook her head mournfully. She could not share Craig's optimistic view. Her mother was not the woman to change her mind easily. Even years of anxiety and trouble had not humbled her naturally domineering spirit.

Dorothy had kept back nothing—had not sought to soften or explain away the truth. When her mother's face grew pale and her lips twitched with angry invectives, she gently reiterated her speech. Craig believed himself engaged to Joan—actually engaged. He considered Joan's absence at the wedding would be a direct insult to her and him too, and nothing would induce him to be present.

'If you think I am going to tell your father this, you are mistaken, Dorothy; I should be ashamed to do so.'

'There is no need,' returned Dorothy quietly.

'John talked to him last night. Craig wished me to explain things to him, so I did, and then John said he would talk to father.'

'An explanation was certainly needful. I am afraid Lord Helmore must feel justly offended by Craig's extraordinary behaviour.'

'No, mother, he was only very kind and concerned. He is so sorry for Craig; he seems to think he is so deeply in love and needs help. So he offered to talk to father, but I have not heard the result of the conversation.

'Your father has said nothing to me.' Lady Merriton spoke in rather a bewildered way. If Lord Helmore were not offended, it must surely mean that he had taken Craig's part? If all her men-folk were leagued against her, and Dorothy also, how was she to maintain her point single-handed? There was no hope of Cicely now. The nut-browne mayde and her money would not belong to Craig. Lady Merriton could have wept as she thought of this.

'It was very late when father came upstairs; he would not have disturbed your night's rest for the world. Very likely he is only waiting to finish his business letters before he comes to you.' For, unless they went out, Lady Merriton spent her mornings in her sister-in-law's pleasant sitting-room, which opened out of her bedroom. Dorothy's surmise was quite correct, for at that moment Lord Merriton was dashing off his last business letter at a great rate, in his anxiety to join his wife.

'Well, Dorothy,' observed her mother in a tired voice, 'I don't see that there is any good in going on talking; it is very hard that you are to be upset by your brother's selfishness just now. I will hear what

your father has to say.' And she would have risen, but Dorothy suddenly knelt down beside her and held her fast.

'I have not quite finished, mother dear. I want to tell you how happy—how more than happy, it will make me if you will only let Joan come to the wedding, and be good to her and Craig. Oh, I want to tell you something, only I don't know how to express myself; but ever since Arthur died, and John asked me to be his wife, I seem to see things differently. I never quite believed that Craig was so much in earnest, I thought as you did that he might in time care for Cicely; but I see now that I was wrong. If he does not marry Joan, his life will be spoiled. And oh, mother darling, don't be angry, but both John and I think he ought to be allowed to choose his own wife. What does it matter if they are poor. What is money, after all, compared with happiness and a faithful love?'

'Eh, what—bless my soul, Dollie, have you stolen a march on me!' and Lord Merriton came fussily into the room. 'I promised Helmore that I would talk things over with you, Hildegarde, and now the girl's been beforehand with me.' But the Earl's eyes twinkled as he looked at his daughter. Perhaps in his heart he was not sorry that his way had been smoothed for him.

'Then I will go downstairs and leave you and mother together.' And as Dorothy kissed her mother's hands, a faint smile answered the mute appeal for forgiveness. Never but once before had Dorothy dared to assert her opinion, or to contradict the home ruler, but it was evident that her boldness had given no offence, and she withdrew with a light heart. She had done her best for Craig, and she must leave the rest in her father's hands.

'Well, Hildegarde, my love,' and Lord Merriton sat down beside his wife, 'I have lots to say, but I hardly know where to begin, or what Dorothy has told you.'

'There is no need for you to repeat that,' returned Lady Merriton coldly. 'Dorothy has been sufficiently explicit. Our son has set his parents at defiance,' and there was a trembling of the muscles under her chin as she said this. 'He has told Lady Cicely that he is engaged to Joan Leigh, and that he absolutely refuses to attend the wedding unless Joan is there too. Now, Merriton, will you kindly inform me without any further loss of time what Lord Helmore thought of this insolence on his future brother-in-law's part?'

Lady Merriton did not always measure her words when she was talking to her husband. She was also accustomed to check him a little peremptorily when he was inclined to wander from the main point. She had no wish for recapitulation, and she was intensely anxious to know Lord Helmore's opinion.

'Well, my dear, Lord Helmore did not seem to take it seriously at all. There was a smile on his face when he said of course Josselyn must be present, and that we must put our heads together to see what could be done, as the young man would certainly not give way.'

'He must be made to give way, Merriton'—but there was no assurance in Lady Merriton's tone.

'Tut, tut, that's easier said than done,' returned the Earl good-humouredly. 'Craig has a pretty strong will of his own; he takes after you in that, my dear. But let us leave this for the moment, there is something interesting I want to tell you.'

Lady Merriton looked as though she were inclined to doubt the interest, but her husband hurried on.

'Of course Helmore told me in confidence, but when I said I had no secrets from my wife—that's true, isn't it, old lady?—he begged that it should go no farther.'

'Yes, I understand; go on, my dear.'

'Well, it seems he and Templeton had a talk the last time Helmore dined there. You know what a nice fortune Miriam has of her own, and so well invested too. We have often spoken of it, and said what a pity it was that there were no children to inherit all these good things.' And as Lady Merriton nodded in assent—'Well, Templeton told Lord Helmore that Miriam had just made a fresh will, and that her money was to be divided equally between Dorothy and Craig.'

'Oh, Merriton, is this really true?' And Lady Merriton sat up erect on the couch in her excitement.

'It is as true as that I am sitting here. The girl has always been a favourite with Miriam, and she seems to have taken a great fancy to Craig. Just think, Hildegarde, what a relief this would have been to our minds if Dorothy had remained single; and even now it will come in handy if she has children of her own.' Then a softened look came into Lady Merriton's eyes.

'I hope she will. Think what a joy it would be, Merriton, to have children's feet pattering about the old corridors at the Abbey!'

Lord Merriton patted his wife's hand kindly. 'You were always a baby-lover, Hilda—but it will make old folks of us! But you must not think only of Dorothy, Craig needs his share of the money even more.'

'Oh yes, of course—I know that.'

'Poor Josselyn's extravagance has impoverished the estate sadly, and of course Craig has to suffer for his

brother's improvidence. But Lathom tells me that, now the Grosvenor Square house is let, and that bit of land sold, and all poor Josselyn's debts cleared, we shall soon get to rights; only there must not be two establishments for the next three or four years.'

'My dear Merriton'—rather impatiently—'this is all ancient history.'

'Yes, I know, but I am repeating it for a purpose. Helmore gave me an idea last night which rather took my breath away, and kept me awake half the night. We were talking about Dorothy, and he was saying how much we should both miss her, and what a devoted and unselfish daughter she was, and so on. And then he said suddenly, what a pity it was that we should not consent to Craig's marriage with Miss Leigh, that his heart was set on the girl, and that Dorothy loved her like a sister. "She seems to have grown up amongst you all," were his words. "Why should not Josselyn marry her and bring his wife to the Abbey? she would be a daughter to you both when Dorothy has left." Now, Hilda, my love, what do you say to Helmore's suggestion? I tell you honestly that I see no objection.' Then Lady Merriton tried to summon up her indignation, but it fell a little flat.

'Merriton, you surely cannot be serious, and it was you who said that Craig must marry money?'

'I do not deny it, my dear, and I meant it too; but you may take a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink if he is not thirsty. Craig refuses to marry money, or to marry any one but Joan, and he is a good lad—the best of all my sons,' continued the Earl in a voice of strong emotion. 'And he has given up his soldiering to please us, and I hate to see him restless and unhappy.'

'Oh, Merriton, Merriton!' in a worn-out voice.

'Let him have Joan, peace is better than money,' continued the Earl. 'And the Abbey will be so dull and empty when Dollie has gone. I am fond of Joan and so are you, and it would make Mary so happy, poor thing. They could have their own rooms and their own servants, and I will keep a hunter or two in the stables for Craig. Templeton would lend them his house when they want to go up to town. Oh, I was awake for hours planning it all. Think of it, dear love, and I am sure you will see the advantages, and consent to make the boy happy.'

Lady Merriton pressed her husband's hand. 'I will think of it, I promise you that,' she said faintly. 'But I cannot talk any more just now. Will you tell them to leave me alone a little?' Then the Earl kissed her forehead and left the room, tiptoeing as he went.

Lady Merriton lay back on the pillows of her couch and closed her eyes. But she was not sleeping. Never had her mind been clearer or more active. They were all against her; one by one Craig had won them over to his side. He would marry Joan, and nothing she could do would prevent it. It was clear to her that Merriton wished it—that the thought of the young couple making their home with them at the Abbey was delightful to him.

'I am fond of Joan,' he had said to her, 'and so are you,' and she could not deny this. And yet the thought that Joan should take Dorothy's place as the daughter of the house gave her no pleasure. Joan was not sweet and docile like Dorothy; she had a will of her own and plenty of spirit, though she had her good qualities too.

She stopped at this point to marvel again over Craig's infatuation. If only Joan had been beautiful instead of being only graceful and distinguished-looking! Oh yes, she was certainly that. And then how pleasant it used to be to hear her singing like a bird as she ran down the corridors!

And then, all at once, she thought of Josselyn's death-bed. As she watched her boy die, was there any room in her agonised soul for worldly schemes and thoughts? In the valley of that shadow one treads solemnly as though on holy ground.

'I was a better woman when I prayed beside my Arthur,' she said to herself, 'and when I followed him to his grave. What has made me so set on my own will since then? Does the devil tempt us in our hours of weakness? It seems to me as though I would have done anything to bring about a marriage between Craig and Cicely. But it was not to be.

'God forgive me, for I have been a selfish, mercenary mother, and made my boy unhappy. I have sacrificed them all. Poor Mary, who has been so good and patient, and Dorothy, who has been missing her friend. Merriton is right—peace is better than money.' And then Lady Merriton's eyes filled with tears.

An hour later she entered her husband's study, and as he would have risen in his astonishment at seeing her there, she put her hand on his broad shoulder.

'Merriton, I have been thinking about it, and I have made up my mind that it shall be as you all wish. Dorothy shall have Joan for her bridesmaid, and if Craig will consent to bring his wife to the Abbey, I will try to make them as happy as I can.'

'God bless you, Hilda! And I am to tell him this?'

'Yes, and you may tell Dorothy too, for all this has exhausted me.' And then Lady Merriton gave her husband a loving look and went back to her room.

CHAPTER XLI

'I NEVER SAID WHERE!'

Yet out of the gloom the morning star
Shines on the sky;
And deep in the heart is the hope always,
That there may be better and brighter days
In the bye-and-bye.

ADELA WILKINS.

'ONLY four days to Christmas, and Craig has made no sign,' Joan said to herself rather dejectedly as she dressed to go to the Cathedral as usual. It was a clear, cold December morning, 'seasonable and not unpleasantly chill,' as Canon Leigh had remarked at breakfast. 'But all the same, my love,' addressing his wife, 'I should advise you to remain at home, as you have not quite lost your cold.' And Silence submitted to her husband's dictate with her usual amiability.

Marital authority had been exercised successfully, but no amount of fraternal advice would have kept Joan away from the Cathedral that morning. She could not have controlled her restlessness indoors. Each day she had a vague hope that she might see a certain tall soldierly figure take possession of the opposite stall in the choir.

Craig had promised that he would see her before Christmas, and not for one moment did she distrust his word, although his continued silence somewhat perplexed her. She knew he was at Brantwood, for he had dined *tête-à-tête* with Lady Mary one evening, and the latter had remarked in her letter that he seemed in good spirits. 'I think we both enjoyed our evening,' she observed.

Well, it was very puzzling, thought Joan ; but there were still four days before Christmas. And then she hurried down, as she knew Heath was expecting her to walk with him.

There were not more than half-a-dozen people at matins, and Craig was certainly not amongst them. Joan tried to forget her disappointment and to attend to her prayers without distraction, but it was not easy. Poor human nature is weak, and wandering thoughts are as hard to combat as a host of midges on a summer's day.

Canon Leigh was going into the town after service, but Joan felt too depressed to accompany him. So she slipped away and took a solitary walk, which made her feel a little better. But it was hardly twelve when she entered St. Breda's Lodge. Prescott, who admitted her, had an unwonted air of excitement.

'There's visitors in the study, Miss Joan,' she said. 'The drawing-room fire wasn't lighted and I was forced to put them there as it was warm. They asked for you—there are the cards.' And Prescott presented them almost with awe. Joan tingled with nervous excitement from head to foot as she read the names—'The Earl of Merriton' and 'Lady Dorothy Bastow.'

'Yes, they asked for you, Miss Joan,' continued Prescott ; 'and my mistress is with them.' But Joan

could wait for no more. Prescott had wished to explain to her that the drawing-room fire was burning splendidly, and that she had had orders to lay two more places at the luncheon-table. But Joan could not have taken it in. Lord Merriton and Dorothy! What could have brought them to St. Breda's? Something had happened or was about to happen! Joan's knees were shaking and she was a little pale as she entered the study, but Lady Dorothy's affectionate hug and the Earl's unusually warm greeting soon brought the colour back.

'I see we have taken you by surprise, my dear,' he said, kissing her in his old fatherly fashion. 'We have been half-an-hour talking to your good sister-in-law, and she has been kind enough to ask us to have luncheon.'

'If Lady Dorothy and Lord Merriton will kindly excuse me, I think I will leave you to talk to your friends, Joan.' Silence spoke rather nervously and seemed a little excited and agitated; but Lord Merriton looked after her admiringly.

'A fine woman, Mrs. Leigh,' he observed—'uncommonly handsome too! She was a bit shy at first, but Dollie soon thawed her. Now, Joan, come and sit down by me, for I have rather an important message to you from my wife, and we have come all this way to deliver it. Eh, what, Dorothy?' rather irritably, for the Earl hated to be interrupted.

'Oh, father, don't you remember'—rather reproachfully—'that we arranged that I was to give my own message first?' Then Lord Merriton burst into an apologetic laugh.

'I quite forgot; I am getting a bit doity, I am afraid. Well, fire away, Dollie.'

'You shall have mother's message afterwards, Joan

dear,' went on Dorothy, with a sweet, earnest look, 'but no one but myself must ask you to be my bridesmaid. You and Cicely will be together. It is all arranged, and I mean to see about your dress to-morrow. We are spending the night in town, father and I.'

'I am to be your bridesmaid?' faltered Joan. 'Oh, do you really mean it, Dorothy?'

'Yes, yes, we all wish it—mother and every one; and Aunt Mary is so pleased. Now it is your turn, father.'

'Well, Joan,' recommenced the long-suffering Earl, 'my wife sends her dear love to you, and begs me to say that she is very desirous of having a talk with you; and as she is not strong enough to undertake a journey to St. Breda's, she is sure that you will not refuse to go to her.'

'Refuse to go to Lady Merriton!' with a deep flush.

'No, of course not, you are far too good and well-behaved a little girl for that. So you will just pack up your things and come back with us to-morrow. Your room is all ready—Lady Mary told me this morning—and you will come up to the Abbey and get your talk over with my lady, and then we shall be all ready for a peaceful Christmas.'

'Do you mean, I am not to come back here?' in an astonished voice.

'Come back! Of course not. Don't I tell you we all want you, and don't mean to let you go again?' But he had told her nothing of the kind. 'I can't have Lady Mary left alone like this. I told Mrs. Leigh so, and she quite agreed with me, and said she would have you all ready packed for the early train. Sensible woman that!'

'Father wishes you to join us in town as early as possible to-morrow, Joan,' explained Dorothy gently, as

she saw the girl's bewilderment. 'We are at the Metropole, as it is more central. If you come up by the early train, we will meet you at the station, and you can leave your luggage there; and as I have made an appointment with Madame Flaubert, there will be just time for her to take your orders. We need not trouble about the milliner, as Aunt Mary is sending up one of your hats. We shall get a hurried luncheon somehow, and father is sure to order a tea-basket—he always does on the shortest journey—so we shall not be starved.'

Dorothy's feminine tact made her mention all these minute details; she thought it would make things more real to Joan, who still wore a dazed and bewildered expression. What did it all mean? Joan was asking herself. There had been no mention of Craig—his name had not been breathed—but Lady Merriton had sent her dear love and wanted to see her, and she was going home for good, and she was to be Dorothy's bridesmaid and pair with Lady Cicely! And surely this was sufficient joy for the present.

Canon Leigh's entrance at that moment interrupted the conversation, and Joan, suddenly remembering her duties, carried off Lady Dorothy to her room to refresh and straighten herself after her journey. But the two girls had hardly time to exchange a word before the gong summoned them.

Joan paused on the staircase.

'You are sure it is quite true, Dollie?'

'Absolutely true. Oh, I know so well what you are feeling, dear, but you will wake up presently. John was wondering who would have the pretty sapphire and diamond bangle, and he was so pleased when he heard it would come to you.'

But even this pleasant piece of intelligence did not restore Joan to her normal condition. She ate her luncheon in a sort of dream, and yet nothing escaped her observation. She noticed with secret pride the perfect ease with which her brother entertained his distinguished guests, and the alert brightness of his aspect assured her of his satisfaction; and she also observed Silence's shy pleasure in Lady Dorothy's conversation. Nothing could exceed the Earl's affability; he talked to the Winchester boys and asked Noel's age, and made pleasant speeches to Wanda and Jessica. Jess was on her good behaviour for once—a real live Earl inspired her with awe. 'Though, after all,' as she remarked afterwards to her mother, 'he was only a nice red-faced old gentleman, who looked more like a farmer than a nobleman.'

As soon as luncheon was over, Lord Merriton hurried his daughter away. A few final directions were given to Joan, which Canon Leigh privately noted; and as he had a call to make in that direction, he drove with them to the station.

Joan woke up in reality as the carriage wheels were lost in the distance. The children were gathered round her in a bunch, full of noisy lamentations that she was going away, and that their Christmas would be quite spoilt without Aunt Joan. But their mother promptly silenced them.

'Don't be selfish, children; your aunt would far rather be at Brantwood. Now there is no time to waste in talk. I am coming to your room, Joan, to help with your packing.'

Joan was truly thankful for her assistance. Silence was always so collected and capable when there was any business on hand. She never fussed or talked as some workers do. Joan had other things to think about

besides her packing. She had to entrust to Silence's care all the gifts she had been preparing for Christmas for the children and servants, not omitting Heath and Silence herself. There was even a pretty little remembrance for Mrs. Ramsay.

When the packing was over she went across to Kenwyn to bid her friends good-bye, but she had no time to linger in the pleasant fireside circle. 'I have promised the children to be back for tea,' she said a little breathlessly. She had seen a good deal of Basil Ramsay, and liked him very much. He was leaning back in the luxurious easy-chair that Dick Trafford had appropriated for his own use, and looked contentedly at his stepmother, who was sitting opposite him. Canon Ramsay had evidently been reading aloud.

'Dick is coming back to us for Christmas and the New Year,' observed Felicia placidly, when Joan had hurriedly stated her errand. He and Basil get on very well together—don't they, Alick?' Canon Ramsay smiled in rather a humorous way. 'He says that the missionary is more highly flavoured than he expected, and that there is some spice of fun about him.'

'Dick little knows what a pickle you were in your young days—eh, lad?' But there was a tender, fatherly gleam in Canon Ramsay's eyes as they rested on his son's face.

When Joan took her leave, Felicia followed her out into the hall.

'I am so glad, dear,' she whispered; 'you will have a happy Christmas at Morningside with your dear old friend.'

'Oh yes, I hope so; but'—blushing—'we always spend the evening at the Abbey—it is an old custom, you know.'

'Yes, and I love old customs—yule logs, and mistletoe boughs, and, above all, family gatherings at Christmas. There, I will not keep you. The happiest of all New Years to you, Joan dear!' But though Joan thanked her for her good wishes, her heart was too full for much speech. What would the new year bring to her and Craig?

Joan did her best to make the children happy that evening, but she was thankful when bed-time came. When she wished her brother good-night, he put his hand under her chin and looked at her very kindly.

'Silence says that I must not talk to you to-night or you will not sleep. But I want to say this, Joan, whether things go smoothly or not—and in my opinion there is little doubt that Lady Merriton has changed her mind—I mean to come soon and see you and Lady Mary, and then we will have a grand palaver.'

'Oh, Heath, will you really—how kind of you! We shall love to have you!' and Joan's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

'Then I will not fail to turn up. There, God bless you, dear child!' and he kissed her with real brotherly tenderness.

Silence followed her into her room, which looked very cheery with its blazing fire.

'Dear Joan,' she said softly, 'we shall all miss you very much, but I would not have it otherwise for the world, and I am more glad than I can say that things seem coming right. Now I want you to promise me to go quickly to bed, and try not to think. Remember what an early breakfast you will have, and the day will be so long and fatiguing.'

Then Joan assured her that she would do her best. But the fire had died down to a smouldering red mass

before she sank into a sound sleep, and it seemed the middle of the night when the housemaid came with her morning cup of tea.

The hurried breakfast was soon over and the good-byes said. Canon Leigh, who was aware of Lady Mary's old-fashioned notions, had fully intended from the first to accompany Joan to Charing Cross. But he said nothing to her until he took his place in the compartment.

'Oh, Heath,' she exclaimed in distress, 'the idea of putting yourself out in this way for me!'

'I am not putting myself out in the least,' he returned coolly. 'As soon as I have seen you safely with your friends and have settled about your luggage, I am going to the S.P.G. for those books I wanted, and then on to the Army and Navy Stores. I have quite a formidable list to work off. And if there is time, I shall interview my tailor. You know I am always rather glad of an excuse for spending a day in town.' And as Joan knew this was the truth, she said no more.

Lord Merriton, who was always punctual, was on the platform, and Dorothy was waving from a cab window. Joan had hardly time to bid her brother good-bye before she was hurried into the vehicle and the order given to drive as fast as possible to Madame Flaubert's. Lord Merriton was always fussy on these occasions, but Dorothy assured her privately that they had ample time. Joan was fitted and everything settled before Lord Merriton turned up again to escort them to the restaurant. But Joan, who had small appetite for her luncheon, was glad when it was over and they were on their way to Waterloo.

'There, didn't I tell you so?' remarked Dorothy

triumphantly, as they overheard Lord Merriton give an order for a tea-basket.

'You need not laugh, Dollie,' he returned good-humouredly, unfolding his *Graphic*; 'Joan has eaten next to nothing, and she will be glad of a cup of tea by and by.' And he was right.

It was quite dark when they reached the station. As Lord Merriton put the two girls into the carriage, he gave some order to the footman which Joan could not hear, and the man's answer, 'The cart is here, my lord—Fenton will take the luggage on to Morningside,' also failed to reach her.

It was useless to try and discern anything in the darkness, so Joan leant back and closed her eyes. How delightful to think that she would be with Lady Mary in a few minutes! She had to keep her thoughts concentrated on that one point, for anything else made her giddy. Then she suddenly opened her eyes. Surely they were turning in through the Abbey gateway?

'What does this mean,' she faltered; 'I thought I was going to Morningside first?' Then Dorothy took her hand.

'No, dear, Aunt Mary is not expecting you yet. She knows mother wished us to bring you straight to the Abbey—we thought you understood that.' But Joan mutely shook her head; she was trembling now with nervousness.

In another moment the carriage stopped, the door was flung open, and she could see the brightly-lighted hall, and two or three servants came forward. But it was not one of these who assisted Joan to descend, and whose strong, warm grasp she would have recognised anywhere.

'You are punctual as usual, father,' observed Craig

in his genial voice. 'Good evening, Dollie, I nearly overlooked you. Now then, Joan,' with a change of tone intended for her ear alone, 'will you come with me, please, for I have promised to take you straight to mother?' and Craig quietly took the little trembling hand and placed it on his arm. 'Don't be nervous, the mater is all right' Then in a still lower tone—'Joan dear, were you not wondering a little at my silence? But I have kept my word—I said I would see you before Christmas, but I never said where!'

CHAPTER XLII

'WILL YOU COME TO US, MY CHILD?'

> Take joy home,
> And make a place in thy great heart for her,
> And give her time to grow, and cherish her;
> Then will she come, and oft will sing to thee,
> When thou art working in the furrows, ay,
> Or weeding in the sacred hour of dawn.
> It is a comely fashion to be glad—
> Joy is the grace we say to God.
>
> JEAN INGELOW.

'MOTHER, I have brought Joan!' Craig's clear voice quite resounded through the large, lofty room. Then a faint flush rose to Lady Merriton's cheek as she came forward with stately step to meet them.

'It is very good of you to come to me, my dear,' she said, as she kissed the girl kindly.

'I think the goodness is on your side, Lady Merriton'—in a low voice; 'you know I am always ready to come to you.' But Joan spoke with such evident nervousness and embarrassment, and the small white face looked so young and appealing, that Lady Merriton's good motherly heart responded at once.

'She looks tired, Craig; you had better bring her some tea.' But Joan negatived this very decidedly.

'I do not need any; Lord Merriton was so kind,

he ordered a tea-basket in the train. And I am not really tired at all, only———' here Joan looked up shyly at Craig from under her long eyelashes. She was conscious that he was watching her, and it added to her embarrassment. Oh, if she could only be alone with him and ask him what it all meant! But Lady Merriton had decided otherwise.

'Then we will have our little talk, dear, and I will send Craig away. Tell your father and Dorothy,' addressing her son, 'that I will see them later on, but just now Joan and I do not wish to be disturbed.'

'All right, mater,' and Craig gave Joan a quick glance which she could not meet. But as he closed the door his mood was so joyful that he broke into a boyish whistle which reached the girl's ear and made her tingle with delight.

'Take off your hat and your stole, my child, you will feel more comfortable.' And Joan mechanically obeyed. Then she took the low seat, so snugly screened from the fire, which stood beside the couch, and waited for Lady Merriton to begin the conversation.

Her first speech rather surprised the girl.

'I hope Madame Flaubert fitted you nicely, Joan, and that you like the dresses.'

'I thought them lovely—nothing could be in better taste. Oh, Lady Merriton, I think it is so good of you to allow me to be one of dear Dorothy's bridesmaids!'

'I mean to be more good to you than that, Joan. My dear, will you listen to me a moment? I want you to understand that Lord Merriton and I had no personal objection to you when we refused our consent to Craig's marriage with you.'

'Dear Lady Merriton, do you think I did not know —that I ever expected anything so impossible!' And Joan, in spite of her glass screen, flushed to the roots of her hair.

'I don't know about the impossibility, Joan; but at that time it seemed to us that it was Craig's duty to marry some girl who had a fortune of her own. You know, of course,' in rather a hesitating manner, 'that we hoped that he might have chosen Lady Cicely.'

'Oh yes,' returned Joan with painful eagerness, 'and no one could have been more desirable. It seems to me that she has everything that one could wish—beauty, rank, wealth, and the most delightful temperament.'

'You are right,' with a regretful sigh. 'But it was not to be; Craig had set his heart on some one else. You know whom, Joan.'

The girl hung her head. 'I did all I could to discourage him, Lady Merriton.'

'My dear, you behaved as well as a girl could; Lord Merriton and I have always said so. But circumstances have altered. Our daughter is leaving us, and we no longer think it right to stand in the way of our son's happiness—our only remaining son.'

Joan was silent. Her head was bowed still lower, but she was listening so keenly that she could have heard a pin drop.

'Dorothy is leaving us, and we shall be very lonely. Dear Joan, will you let bygones be bygones and commence afresh? Will you come to us, my child, and be our daughter in Dorothy's place?'

'How do you mean?' in a startled voice; 'I am Lady Mary's adopted child.'

'Yes, I know,' with an indulgent smile; 'but you

need not to be afraid that Lady Mary will offer any objection. When I consulted her about the arrangement, she actually shed tears of joy.'

'But what arrangement do you mean? I am very dense, but I do not feel able to understand.'

'I mean that, if she will only consent,' and here Lady Merriton took the girl's cold, clammy hand in hers, 'Craig should bring his wife here and make the Abbey their home. Will you come, Joan, and cheer two lonely old people, my love? We will do all in our power to make it a real home for you, and you shall be our own dear child. Only tell me you will come.' Then Joan raised her face and her eyes were full of tears.

'I will come if Craig wishes it,' she faltered, 'and if you really, really mean it.' Then she felt herself drawn into a motherly embrace.

'Thank you, my dear; then that is settled as far as you and I are concerned,' returned Lady Merriton in a tone of relief, as she rose from the couch. 'Now we have only to ascertain Craig's wishes'—and she rang the bell, rather to Joan's dismay. Surely she did not intend to question Craig in her presence? But Lady Merriton's next speech relieved her.

'Of course I am aware of his wishes, or I should not have mentioned my plan, but I am sure you would like a little talk with him.' And then, as the servant entered, she bade him ask Lord Josselyn to come to her, and as the man withdrew she followed him.

Joan was thankful to be left alone even for a minute; she left her corner and stood by the fire, and tried to calm her tumultuous thoughts. She did not move or turn her head when the door opened and Craig crossed the room. The next moment he had put his arms round her and was drawing her gently towards him.

'I am not going to propose to you a third time, Joan,' he said in her ear; 'it is your turn now to say something.'

'Oh, Craig!'

'I shall want more than that,' kissing the soft hair that rested against his shoulder, 'so you may as well be quick about it.'

'Oh, Craig, I don't know what to say!'

'Then I will tell you, and you can repeat it after me, as they do in the marriage service. I, Joan Leigh, promise in all good faith and sincerity to take Craig Bastow as my wedded husband, and to love him all the days of my life.' And he would not let her off, and Joan had actually to say the words, though he could hardly hear them.

Craig laughed a little triumphantly as he kissed her. 'Joan, what a darling you are, but I never saw you quite so shy with me before.'

'It is your fault,' she said unsteadily.

'Come and sit down and let us talk comfortably,' he said coaxingly, for he wished to put her at her ease. It was sweet to make love to her, but he wanted her to be her old frank self, and above all it was necessary for him to find out what she thought of his mother's plan; so he put the question to her.

Joan hesitated for a moment.

'I told Lady Merriton that I would do what you wished. Are you sure that it will suit you, Craig?'

'It will suit me down to the ground,' he said cheerfully, 'for it will enable us to get married as soon as we like. We might have had to wait a year or two if there had been a question of a second establishment.'

'I think your mother really wishes it,' she whispered.

'I am sure of it. Think of this great house and all those empty rooms, and the poor old people sitting like Darby and Joan on each side of the fireplace.'

'But you would be there, Craig?'

'Should I?' mischievously; 'I think I should be oftener at Morningside. What a nuisance Aunt Mary would have found me! By the bye, Joan, did the mater tell you how charmed Aunt Mary is with the arrangement? She can't speak of it without tears in her eyes.'

'Dear Lady Mary! I am so glad.'

'We were talking about it when I dined there,' went on Craig, 'and she told me that she regarded it as providential. "I was always so afraid of Joan marrying some day," she said, "and living far away from me. But if she is at the Abbey we shall be together every day, for I know you will not begrudge your wife to me sometimes." By the bye, darling, you will have to call her "Aunt Mary" soon.'

'Oh no, I like the old name, Craig,' caressing his coat-sleeve. 'You won't mind if I love her best, will you?'

'Better than me?' with a sudden flash of his blue eyes. 'I should think I would mind!'

'Oh, don't be so absurd, Craig! Of course I did not mean you; I was speaking of your mother.' Then Craig burst into a fit of boyish laughter that was delightful to hear.

'I only meant that Lady Mary has been a mother to me ever since dear mother died, and she calls me her adopted child. We do love each other so dearly, Craig, and I could not put any one else in her place.'

'Of course not; the mater would not expect it, darling. But I know you will be good to the old people for my sake.'

'Yes, indeed'; and here Joan gave him a shy, sweet look which made the young man's pulses beat more quickly. 'Somehow it seems too wonderful to be true, as though I have done nothing to deserve such happiness. No, please let me finish, there is something I want to say. You have been so faithful, Craig, but sometimes I ask myself how you can care for me so much when I am not pretty or charming like Lady Cicely.'

'I am sure I don't know,' returned Craig frankly, 'I never was good at definitions. I cared for you, as you call it, just because you were Joan, and it was Joan I wanted and not Lady Cicely or any one else. You are charming enough in my eyes. It is Joan and Joan only whom I love with my whole heart.'

'How nice,' murmured the girl, nestling closer to him. 'Oh, Craig, you must help me to be worthy of my position; I want to justify your choice if I can.'

'I have no fear on that score,' he returned; 'you will do grandly, sweetheart, and astonish them all. By the bye, when you are Lady Josselyn my mother or Lady Mary will have to present you.'

'Don't, Craig, I can't think of all that just now.' Joan's cup of joy was full to the brim—very little would cause it to overflow.

It was the man, not his position she loved. The idea that she would one day be a countess hardly weighed in the balance at all. At the present moment the thought of her prospective glories rather alarmed her than otherwise. Her one idea was that Craig and she would never be separated.

'God has been very good to me,' she whispered, as later on they sat hand in hand in the firelight;

'I do not deserve to be so very happy.' But before Craig could answer this Dorothy came into the room.

'I am so sorry to interrupt you dear people,' she said, 'but you have evidently no idea how late it is. Aunt Mary has just sent across to ask if you are dining here.' Then Joan rose in some confusion.

'Don't flurry yourself, Joan,' observed Craig calmly; 'I will walk across with you, and we will make our apologies together. Aunt Mary is a good sort, and she will understand all about it.' And he was right.

.

It was early in June—the month of roses—and the eve of Joan's wedding day. It had been a long, exciting day, for Canon Leigh and his wife and daughters had arrived at Morningside, and Richard Trafford and the three boys had taken up their quarters at Herondale Rectory. The Abbey was full to overflowing, for Lady Helmore and her husband, the Templetons, and other distant relations of the Merritons had taken possession of the spare rooms; amongst them Lady Cicely and her cousin, Lady Marjorie Colvin, now engaged to the Rev. Morven Rutherford.

Lady Mary, who was a little weary with all the excitement and bustle, had excused herself to her guests and gone up early to her dressing-room, and after a short interval Joan had followed her. Evidently Lady Mary was expecting her, for she pointed smilingly to a low ottoman which stood beside her easy-chair.

'You are sure Heath and Silence do not mind sparing you to me this evening?' she asked a little anxiously.

'No, indeed, they quite understand. Silence has gone upstairs with Jess, and Heath is reading as

comfortably as possible. They know we want to be alone together this last evening.'

'The last evening you will be Joan Leigh!' smoothing the fair hair fondly.

'Yes,' returned the girl dreamily. 'Doesn't it seem wonderful! When I think of to-morrow and all those people at the Abbey, it makes me quite giddy.' But to herself she was saying softly—'To-morrow I shall be Craig's wife.'

'Yes, it is wonderful,' replied Lady Mary gently. 'How little we thought last June, darling, that our troubles would end so happily! I have just been reading the evening Psalm; it is so sweetly appropriate, Joan. "Commit thy way unto the Lord, and put thy trust in Him: and He shall bring it to pass." Has not that been true, my child, and you and Craig have your heart's desire?'

'Indeed it is true, dear Lady Mary. That is my favourite Psalm, but I forgot it would be the one for to-night. Dearest, you must promise not to be dull to-morrow when we have gone. You will have Heath and the children.'

'Dull! when my child is so happy.'

'No, you are too unselfish,' kissing her hand, 'and I know how good they will all be to you. And you must not be dull either when I go to my new home, for we shall see each other every day and have our dear old talks. I shall be more than ever your child then.'

'I know it, darling, and I am perfectly satisfied and happy. Do you remember, Joan, those quaint verses I repeated to you one night when we were both sad at heart and the future looked rather gloomy—"He holds the key of all unknown"? And as Joan smiled

assent, Lady Mary went on—'Surely you and I may be glad. If the key had been put into our hands, we might only have bungled the work and done the wrong thing. But now all is well, my darling, for "He has brought it to pass."' And Joan softly murmured 'Amen' under her breath.

THE END

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